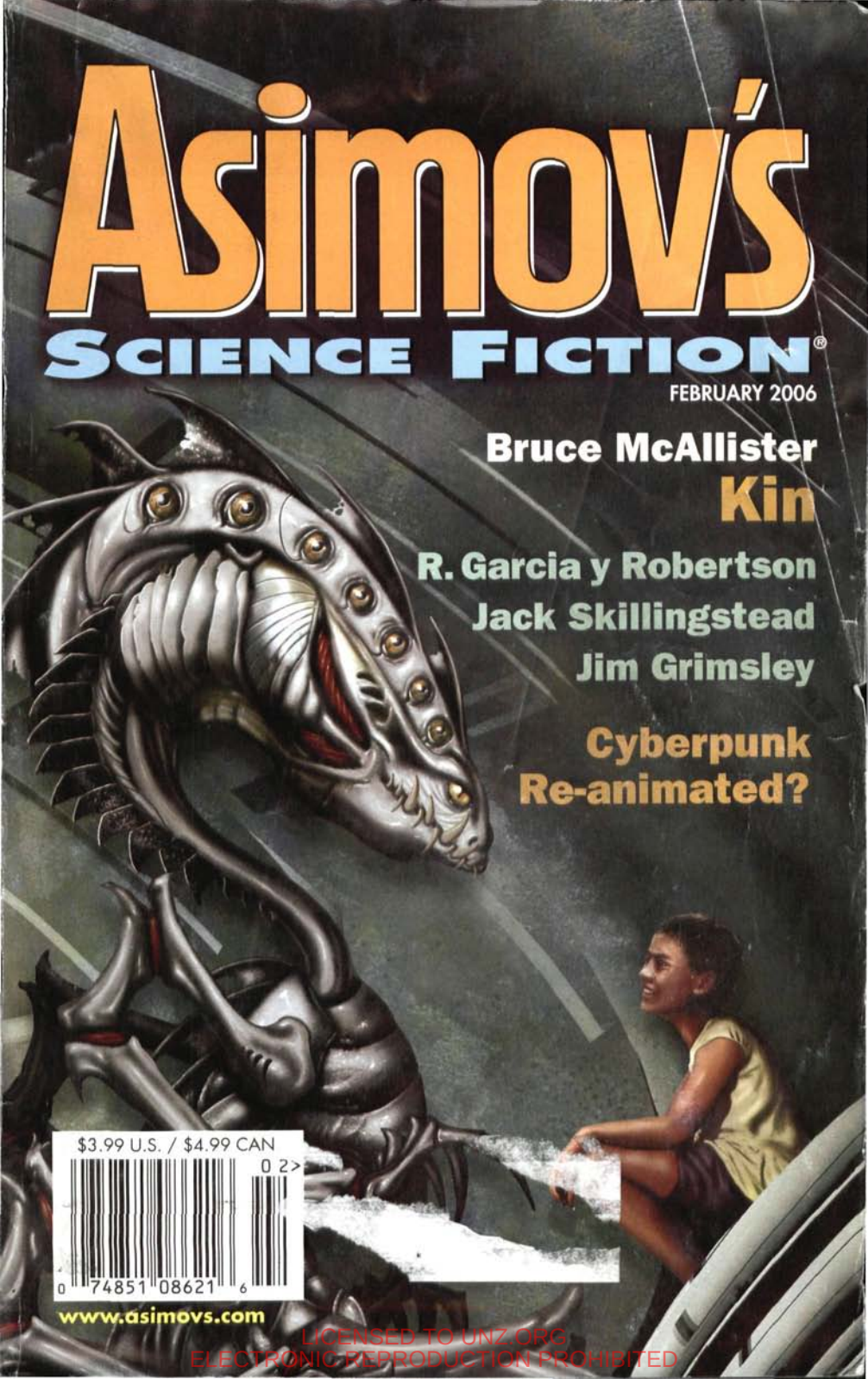

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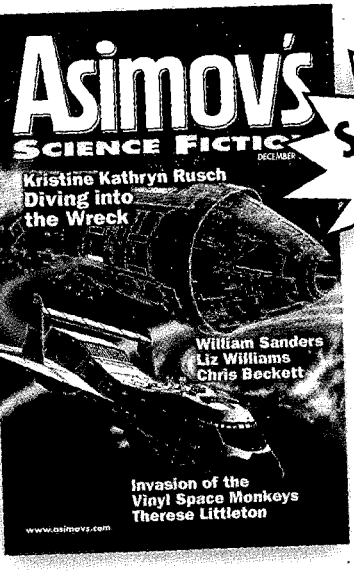

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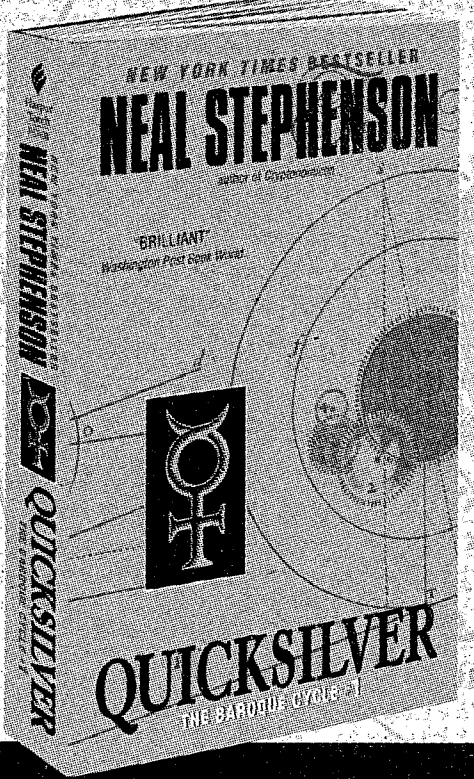

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EDITORIAL

by Sheila Williams

ALTERNATE HISTORY

Science fiction, even hard SF, is filled with acknowledged tropes that many scientists consider implausible. We often take faster-than-light travel, time travel, and developments in nanotechnology for granted without worrying too deeply about the science and technology needed to bring these concepts into existence. Recent correspondence from an *Asimov's* reader made me ponder the nature of another established subgenre of science fiction. The letter writer, Charles M. Barnard, questioned the publication of Harry Turtledove's "He Woke in Darkness" in *Asimov's*. Mr. Barnard wrote, "[this] is a wonderful, engaging, thoughtful story. It is, however, not science fiction. It's not even fantasy."

For those of you who haven't read the story, "He Woke in Darkness" takes place in an America that never happened—at least in our universe. It features events similar to ones that occurred in the 1960s, but it turns the religion of some of the participants, and the race of all of them, on their heads. It's a horror story, but it's also an alternate history story.

But, what is alternate history? Some writers go to great lengths to make alternate history sound like science fiction—it's one of those many universes next to ours that arose out of the quantum flux, or whatever—but most authors tweak the history of the world that we know and just sort of plonk their characters down. There's no real explanation for the discrepancy, it's just some kind of thought experiment. Does that make it fantasy? Well, probably not in the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien or George R.R. Martin, but perhaps in the sense that "fantasy" is a term that can be used as a gigantic umbrella to describe all works of fiction—even science fiction. Does it make it mainstream? Again, perhaps in the obvious sense that fiction is always about alternate realities, worlds that aren't truly real. If fiction were something else, it would be called nonfiction. One can make a case that alternate history is some weird off-shoot of historical fiction, but the subgenre is generally considered science fiction, and it is marketed in the SF section of the bookstore.

So, one might ask, what is science fiction? That's not a question that I've ever contemplated deeply, because I have no intention of limiting my enjoyment of the field, both as a reader and as an editor. The SF writer Jeffrey A. Carver has made an honorable attempt to define it on his free online writing course <*www.writeSF.com*>. Jeff characterizes it as "[those] stories . . . that could not happen without some element of science, or some imagined change (futuristic or otherwise) from the world as we know it today." He adds that, "fantasy also takes place in otherworldly settings, but in this case, the worlds are usually magical or mythical. SF stories tend to be based on, well—science, or worlds that seem possi-

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› or plausible, based on what we ow or can guess about science." This fairly traditional definition science fiction doesn't seem to compass the type of alternate story that isn't brought about rough time travel or quantum echanics. Perhaps it could be sely argued that alternate histo- falls under the "some imagined ange from the world we know it lay" clause. I think, though, that ff meant "if-this-goes-on-scenar-," such as over-population or bal warming, rather than unex- ined changes in our past.

The *Encyclopedia of Science Fic- n* may offer us a way out of this edicament. It attempts to define ernate history as speculative fic- n. Alternate history tales can of- ı be described as "What if . . ." ries. What if the Nazis had won e Second World War? What if the inese had "discovered" and colo- ed America instead of the Euro- ans? What if the United States d been more interested in devel- ing rocket science than atomic apons? The "what if" or "specu- ive fiction" monikers do seem to ply to many alternate history ries, but speculative fiction is other broad umbrella term that ı also be used to describe much science fiction. What if we mas- time travel, what if we en- nter alien civilizations, what if can travel faster than the speed light, what about instantaneous nsportation?

f we think of science fiction as culative fiction, it's easier to wel- ne alternate history into its folds h or without the quantum me- anics, parallel universes, and ne-travel conundrums that are d to dress some alternate history in science fiction clothing. With the lack of rigor in its definition, however, "speculative fiction" may, like "fantasy" or "mainstream," be too broad a term to adequately describe the literature that makes up the canon of science fiction.

Despite the problems with terminology, *Asimov's* is, and always has been, home to stories about all sorts of alternate realities. Some of those alternate realities are alternate histories. Mike Resnick has spun several stories about alternate Teddy Roosevelts, Robert Silverberg and Robert Reed have both meddled with Roman history, as has Harry Turtledove, himself, in his Byzantium series. Not long ago, Lois Tilton allowed the Persians to defeat the Athenians, and an upcoming story by Beth Bernobich will feature a nineteenth-century ascendant Ireland with emancipated women quite unlike the historical women of that era. In a Paul Melko story that will appear in our April/May issue, a young man faces his personal alternate histories.

Roads Not Taken, a collection of stories drawn from *Asimov's* and *Analog,* and edited by Gardner Dozois and Stanley Schmidt for Del Rey Books remains our best-selling anthology. It contains such *Asimov's* stories as Gregory Benford's 1989 "We Could Do Worse" (where Eisenhower dies young and Joe McCarthy is elected president), and Bruce McAllister's 1993 "Southpaw" (where Fidel Castro doesn't say "no" to the New York Giants' scout). Some of these stories have tried to explain their characters' predicaments. Others have left the explanation for the reader to work out. I'm sure that no matter how they're defined, alternate history stories will continue to appear in *Asimov's.* At least in this timeline! ○

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE DAYS OF PERKY VIVIENNE

We live in the twenty-first century. Philip K. Dick helped to invent it.

The standard critical view of Dick, the great science fiction writer who died in 1982, is that the main concern of his work lay with showing us that reality isn't what we think it is. Like most clichés, that assessment of Dick has a solid basis in fact (assuming, that is, that after reading Dick you are willing to believe that *anything* has a solid basis in fact). Many of his books and stories did, indeed, show their characters' surface reality melting away to reveal quite a different universe beneath.

But the games Dick played with reality were not, I think, the most remarkable products of his infinitely imaginative mind. At the core of his thinking was an astonishingly keen understanding of the real world he lived in—the world of the United States, subsection California, between 1928 and 1982—and it was because he had such powerful insight into the reality around him that he was able to perform with such great imaginative force one of the primary jobs of the science fiction writer, which is to project present-day reality into a portrayal of worlds to come. Dick's great extrapolative power is what has given him such posthumous popularity in Hollywood. *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Minority Report*, and half a dozen other Dick-derived movies, though not always faithful to Dick's original story plots, all provide us with that peculiarly distorted Dickian view of reality which, it turns out, was his accurate assessment of the way his own twentieth-century world was going to evolve into the jangling, weirdly distorted place that we encounter in our daily lives.

A case in point is the announcement last spring that a Hong Kong company, Artificial Life, Inc.—what a Dickian name!—is about to provide the lonely men of this world with a virtual girlfriend named Vivienne, who can be accessed via cellphone for a basic monthly fee of six dollars. If you sign up for Vivienne's friendship, she will chat with you about matters of love and romance or almost anything else you might want to discuss, and you will be able to buy her virtual flowers and chocolates, take her to the movies, even— a beautifully creepy Dickian touch—*marry* her. (Which will get you a virtual mother-in-law who will call you in the middle of the night to find out whether you're treating her little girl the right way.)

What this news item brought to mind for me was two of Phil Dick's works—the early (1953) short story, "The Days of Perky Pat," and the dazzling 1965 novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, in which Dick recycled the Perky Pat concept into a breathtaking roller-coaster-ride of a book.

In both of these, Perky Pat is a kind of Barbie doll that becomes the object of intense cult-like fasci-

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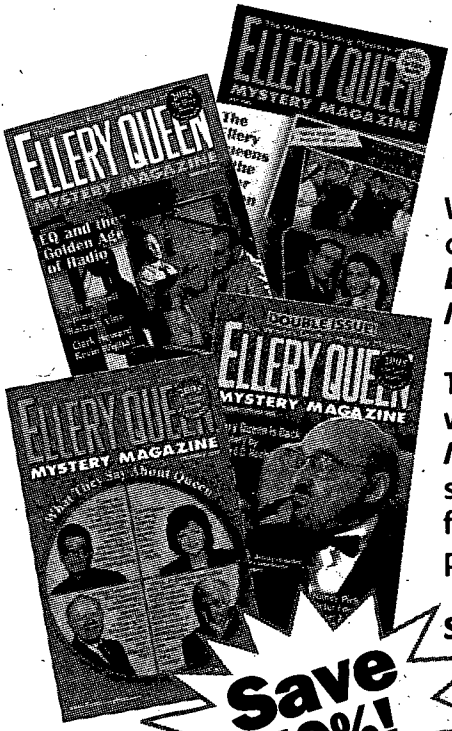

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nation. The earlier story, set in a world devastated by thermonuclear war, shows the survivors building their own Perky Pat dolls, providing them with wardrobes, miniature homes, and tiny hi-fi sets (her virtual boyfriend, Leonard, gets little replicas of tweed suits, Italian shirts, and a Jaguar XKE), and then using the dolls as centerpieces in a sort of Monopoly game in which whole towns participate. The far more sophisticated Dick of *Palmer Eldritch* eliminates the post-nuclear idea and turns Perky Pat into an electronic device adored by millions throughout the Solar System, who enhance their visits to the fantasy-world she provides by chewing a hallucinogenic drug.

So wrote Philip K. Dick, forty years ago, in a science fiction novel that probably didn't earn him more than five thousand dollars and quickly went out of print. (Like Cassandra and various other unlucky prophets, he went unrewarded for his visionary powers in his own lifetime. All the big Hollywood money for his books arrived after his death.) And now, when we move out of classic twentieth-century SF into the hyped-up world of twenty-first-century reality, we get—

Vivienne, at six dollars a month. She's supposed to be available to owners of 3G cellphones (3G means "third generation", the kind of phone that comes with computerized voice-synthesis capabilities, streaming video, and text-message capacity) in Singapore and Malaysia already, will be arriving in Europe later this year, and should be available to American users around the time you read this, barring last-minute technical snafus.

She looks three-dimensional, a hot little number indeed, lithe and slender. She can move through eighteen different backdrops, among them a restaurant, an airport, and a shopping mall. She's programmed to discuss thirty-five thousand topics with you—philosophy, films, art, and, very likely, the novels of Philip K. Dick. She'll translate foreign languages for you, too. Give her an English word and you'll get its equivalent in Japanese, Korean, German, Spanish, Chinese, or Italian. (You key the words in as if you were doing a text message on a cellphone, but Vivienne will answer both in text and in synthesized voice. If you want your steak well done in a Tokyo restaurant, you ask her for the right phrase, and she replies out loud, so that the waiter can hear and understand.)

Vivienne will flirt with you, too. She'll tell you how cute you are, she'll blow kisses to you, she'll parade across your phone's video screen in a scanty gym suit. She will not, however, take the gym suit off, nor will she engage in phone sex with you. Vivienne is not that kind of girl. You can try all your fancy moves on her, if you like, but she's equipped with a number of gambits to use in fending off your advances, you heavy-breathing pervert, you. Although she won't let herself get drawn into anything seriously erotic, Vivienne does engage in a certain degree of badinage that can be usefully instructive to young men who are, shall we say, a bit backward in conversing with actual flesh-and-blood women. Draw her into a conversation on some intimate boy-and-girl matter and her extensive database will provide you with an elaborate rehearsal for the real thing, if moving on from virtual romance to

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something more corporeal is among your ambitions.

Not that Artificial Life, Inc. is planning to aim its product exclusively at lonely heterosexual male geeks. They are just the first consumer targets. The word is that a virtual boyfriend for women is already under development, and that gay and lesbian versions will follow soon after. There's also a Vivienne for Muslim societies who abides by Muslim rules of feminine propriety (no baring of midriffs, no body piercings) and—count on it, my friends, it's a sure bet—there will eventually be an X-rated Vivienne who is programmed to get a lot cozier with the subscribers than the current model is willing to be.

Your cellphone chip, of course, has nowhere near the computing capacity necessary to achieve all this. Vivienne works her girlish magic through a link between your phone and the external servers on which the Vivienne programs reside. One consequence of this is that playing with Vivienne can quickly cost you a lot more than the six dollar monthly basic fee. A nice long schmooze with your virtual girlfriend will quickly exhaust the basic service allowance and run you into overtime. To prevent serious Vivienne addiction, users will be limited to an hour a day with her—at least at the outset. (Somehow, though, those restrictions have a way of disappearing when a product of this sort gets really popular). As for those little gifts you buy her—not just the flowers and the chocolates, but the sports cars and the diamond rings—those get charged to your phone bill too, half a dollar here, a dollar there. What happens to the money you lavish on Vivienne? "The money goes to us," says a smiling Artificial Life executive. (Hello, Mr. Dick!)

So go ahead and sign up. Vivienne will help you with the problems you're having with your real-life girlfriend, if you happen to have one; she will tell you how to buy cool sneakers in a Korean department store; and she will also teach you that girls are mercenary teases who know all sorts of tricks for extracting costly gifts from you but will not gratify your urgent hormonal needs in return. And if you marry her, you get a virtual mother-in-law of a really annoying kind, the best touch of all. No doubt of it: Vivienne's a perfect Philip K. Dick invention.

And I think we'll see more and more of Philip K. Dick's pulp-magazine plot concepts erupting into life all around us as the twenty-

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first century moves along. Even though his characters would discover, again and again, that the world around them was some sort of cardboard makeshift hiding a deeper level that was likewise unreal, what Dick the writer was actually doing was crying out, *Look at all these unscrupulous gadgets: this is what our world really is, and things are only going to get worse.* For us moderns it's Phildickworld all day long. Your computer steals your bank account number and sends it to Nigeria, gaudy advertisements come floating toward us through the air, and now your telephone will flirt with you. It won't stop there.

John Brunner, another of science fiction's most astute prophets, who also did not live to see the twenty-first century arrive, saw all the way back in 1977 that Dick's real theme wasn't the untrustworthiness of reality but the sheer oppressiveness of it:

"Dick's world is rarely prepossessing. Most of the time it is deserted—call out, and only echo answers. There are lovely things in it, admittedly, but they are uncared for; at best they are dusty, and often they are crumbling through neglect. Food here is tasteless and does not nourish. Signposts point to places you do not wish to visit. Clothing is drab, and frays at embarrassing moments. The drugs prescribed by your doctor have such side effects that they are a remedy worse than the disease. No, it is not a pleasant or attractive world.

"Consequently, his readers are extremely disconcerted when they abruptly recognize it for what it is: the world we all inhabit. Oh, the trimmings have been altered—the protagonist commutes by squib or flapple and argues with the vehicle's robot brain enroute—but that's so much verbal window dressing."

Brunner concluded his 1977 essay on Dick by saying, "This I tell you straight up: I do not want to live in the sort of world Dick is so good at describing. I wish—I desperately wish—that I dared believe we don't. Maybe if a lot of people read Dick's work I'll stand a better chance of not living in that world. . . ."

As things turned out, John Brunner, who died in 1995, *didn't* have to live in that world. But we do. And it gets more Phildickian every day. ○

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

IN YOUR EAR

audio leaps

For several years now I have been puzzling over the surge in popularity of audiobooks. The ascent of spoken word publishing appears at first glance to have been technology-driven. Back in the day when LPs ruled the world, it would have been foolhardy to try to publish an entire novel on vinyl, each disc of which might hold from forty-five minutes to maybe an hour of material, tops. Although cassettes began pushing LPs off the sales racks in the seventies, tape technology was more or less planted in living rooms and bedrooms (except for the brief annoyance that was the **Eight-track** <*http://www.8trackheaven.com*>) until the widespread acceptance of the Walkman and boomboxes and cassette decks for cars in the eighties. Still, the takeoff for audiobooks lagged until the nineties. From 1990 to 1998, audiobook sales jumped 360 percent, according to the **Audio Publishers' Association** <*http://www.audiopub.org*>.

Today the fastest growing segment of the audiobook market is downloadable books. Clearly this has to do with the popularity of ultraportable **MP3 players** <*http://www.mp3.com/tech/hardware.php*> in general and **Apple's Ipod** <*http://www.apple.com/ipod*> in particular. There can be little doubt that the star of the downloadable audiobook universe is **Audible.com** <*www.audible.com*>. I'm a big fan of Audible and will come back to it in a moment, but I'm not convinced that advances in tech and convenience are all that are driving the boom market.

One reason my own MP3 player is always close at hand when I'm driving is that I don't find much of interest on the radio anymore. I'm clearly not in the target demographic of the vast majority of music stations, whose rigid playlists would seem to have been programmed by robots. I find precious little classical and/or jazz, alas, and although I admit to punching up the occasional "oldies" station, I'm awfully sick of hearing Mick Jagger whine about his level of **Satisfaction** <*http://www.songfacts.com/detail.lasso?id=449*>. I have little tolerance for talk radio—left or right wing. I do pledge to my local **National Public Radio** <*http://www.npr.org*> station, but there are huge chunks of its broadcast day that bore me silly. Besides, has any story on **Marketplace** <*http://marketplace.publicradio.org*> ever been as exciting as the latest **Richard K. Morgan** <*http://www.richardkmorgan.com*> novel?

But more important than the aridity of radio is that reading a book with your ears is a different experience than reading it with

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your eyes. Of course, I have absolutely no data to back this assertion up, other than some observations of my own listening habits. For example, my mental clock must necessarily tick at a steady pace when I listen to books —I can't really skip over the boring parts. Neither can I easily flip back to check on some half-remembered information I read in an earlier chapter. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to hold complex plots or long chains of subtle reasoning in my mind when I first hear them. And of course, a bad reader can ruin a great story and a great reader can sometime sell a shoddy tale. My point is that, because our culture had not heretofore accustomed us to listening to long passages of the spoken word, it has taken potential listeners some time to get up to speed with the opportunity afforded by all the new tech. We needed to learn how to read audiobooks—and now a lot of us have.

now hear this

If you credit their PR, Audible has "more than seventy thousand hours of audio programs from more than 224 content partners that include leading audiobook publishers, broadcasters, entertainers, magazine and newspaper publishers, and business information providers." I confess that I am myself an enthusiastic subscriber. By my estimate, Audible now offers as many as eight hundred titles that might be of interest to genre readers—depending on how strictly you define our sprawling genre.

There are two ways to look at this statistic. One is to point out that Audible offers one of the largest collections of audio science fiction and fantasy anywhere. The other is to point out that this collection is sadly inadequate. For example, **Isaac Asimov** <*http://www.asimovonline.com*> is represented by just two titles, as is **Sir Arthur C. Clarke** <*http://www.clarkefoundation.org*>. While this very publication licensed a made-for-Audible collection entitled *The Best of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine 2002*, it turned out to be a one shot deal, alas. *Asimov's* readers in search of their favorites will find Audible a decidedly mixed bag. For example, why is there but one **Bruce Sterling** <*http://www.chriswaltrip.com/sterling*> novel and none by **Connie Willis** <*http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?Connie_Willis*>? **George R.R. Martin** <*http://www.georgerrmartin.com*> has four, **Mike Resnick** <*http://www.fortunecity.com/tattooine/farmer/2*> just one. You can find multiple works of Grandmaster **Robert Silverberg** <*http://www.majipoor.com*> but nothing by Grandmaster **Frederik Pohl** <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederik_Pohl*>. No **Charles Stross** <*http://www.antipope.org/charlie*> or **Cory Doctorow** <*http://www.craphound.com*> or **Michael Swanwick** <*http://www.michaelswanwick.com*> or **Robert Reed** <*http://www.starbaseandromeda.com/reed.html*>, but plenty of **Terry Pratchett** <*http://www.terrypratchettbooks.com*> and **Neil Gaiman** <*http://www.neilgaiman.com*> and **Orson Scott Card** <*http://www.hatrack.com*> and **Robert Jordan** <*http://www.tor.com/jordan*>. Do I sound like I'm complaining? Well, maybe I am, but you should understand that I've been downloading two books a

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month from Audible for more than five years now and I'm not about to stop. I'll take what they give me!

But there are other sources of genre audio on the web. For instance, **Telltale Weekly** <*http://www.telltaleweekly.org*> is not as vast a commercial enterprise as Audible, but in many ways it is more noble. Founded by Alex Wilson, it "seeks to record, produce, and sell performances of at least fifty public domain texts per year, with the intention of releasing them under a Creative Commons License five years after their first appearance here." While this "cheap-now, free-later" site offers only a couple of dozen genre pieces at the moment, by the likes of **Kelly Link** <*http://www.kellylink.net*>, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** <*http://www.kristinekathrynrusch.com*>, and **Tobias Buckell** <*http://www.tobiasbuckell.com*>, the collection should continue to grow if you stop by and give it the support it deserves.

Escape Pod <*http://escape.extraneous.org*> is pretty much brand new as I type this, but the site that bills itself as "The Science Fiction Podcast Magazine" already has a lot going for it. As podcaster Steve Ely put it, "People have certain expectations of a magazine—that it comes out on a regular schedule, that it's professional, that it has a consistent format—and we do our best to meet those expectations."

We pause here for a brief info-dump. Podcasting? What the hell is podcasting, you may well ask? Only the latest Next Big Thing on the net! Podcasting is a technology that allows you to subscribe to a site that will then send MP3 (or other audio files) directly to your computer and thence to your Ipod or other player. All this can happen without any effort on your part—assuming your player is connected to your computer. In order to subscribe you need podcatcher software, which you can get free. And what exactly will be on the podcasts? Just about anything you can imagine, from music, chat, reviews, and yes, science fiction stories. We'll take a closer look at the podcasting phenomena in the next installment; meanwhile, back to Escape Pod.

I have high hopes for this site, which promises an ambitious schedule of a podcast story every week. I like the editorial policy and the stories I've listened to so far sound great. As a paying reprint market, the site has been able to attract some wonderful writers, like **Gregory Frost** <*www.gregoryfrost.com*>, **Tim Pratt** <*http://www.sff.net/people/timpratt*>, and **Greg van Eekhout** <*http://www.sff.net/people/greg*>. For more about Escape Pod, check out the **interview** <*http://www.sfsite.com/columns/vox204.htm*> Steve Ely

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gave to Scott Danielson over at **SF Site** <*http://www.sfsite.com*>.

Speaking of Scott Danielson, he and Jesse Willis preside over what I consider to be the best audiobook resource on the web, **SFFaudio** <*http://www.sffaudio.com*>. This is primarily a review site, and Jesse, Scott, and many others do an excellent job of commenting not only on stories but on production values as well. Their reviews range from offerings from major audiobook publishers like **Harper Audio** <*http://www.harpercollins.com/channels.asp?channel=Audio*> and **Books on Tape** <*http://www.booksontape.com*> to smaller companies like **Infinivox** <*http://www.audiotexttapes.net*> and the marvelous **Full Cast Audio** <*http://www.fullcastaudio.com*> to one shot story readings by **Richard Butner** <*http://www.lcrw.net/trampoline/stories/butnerash.htm*> and **Kelly Link** <*http://wnyc.org/shows/spinning/episodes/11012002%3Cbr%3E*>. SFFaudio also features interviews, profiles of publishers and a comprehensive list of audio editions of Hugo Award-winning fiction, as well as a link page for free online audio. This is a must click site!

One of the online sites listed by SFFaudio is the late, lamented (by me, at least) **Seeing Ear Theater** <*http://www.scifi.com/set*>. As SFFaudio notes, "In the United States, radio drama is virtually dead. But just after the internet blossomed, 'radio' drama briefly revived itself. Between 1997 and 2001 dozens of Science Fiction and Fantasy stories were produced by a dedicated and talented crew of multimedia artists, writers, actors, and musicians using the RealPlayer technology to deliver 'radio' drama via streaming audio. And what a revival it was!" I was proud to be part of that revival, adapting three of my own stories and writing one original play. All of the seventy-odd plays are still up on the Seeing Ear site, available to stream to your computer at no cost. Among them are adaptations of some of the best known stories of the eighties and nineties, like **The Lucky Strike** <*http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/lucky*>, **The Jaguar Hunter** <*http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/jaguar*>, **Fire Watch** <*http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/fire*>, **They're Made Out of Meat** <*http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/meat*>, and **The Death of Captain Future** <*http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/captain*>. Many of them have migrated over to Audible as well. But it's not only the appearance of some of our brightest literary lights that commends this site to your attention. The plays were cast with serious star power. Voice talent included Claire Bloom, Steve Buscemi, Brian Dennehy, Peter Coyote, Paul Giamatti, Timothy Hutton, Lou Diamond Phillips, Stanley Tucci, and Alfre Woodard, to drop but a few names.

exit

Plug an inexpensive microphone into your computer and download **Audacity** <*http://audacity.sourceforge.net*>, the free, open source software for recording and editing sounds, and you too can publish your own science fiction and fantasy audiobooks on the web.

So, what are you waiting for? ❍

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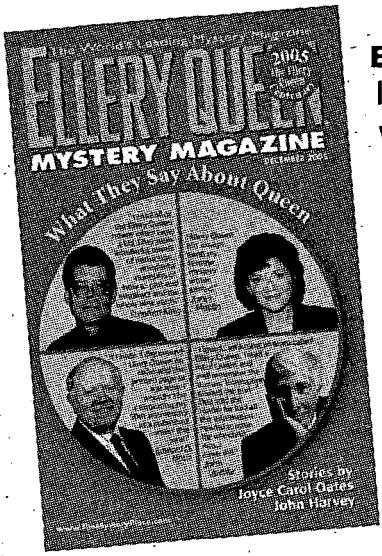

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THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Brooks Peck

CYBERPUNK IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN—WHERE ELSE?—JAPAN

Let's play a word game. I'll say a word and you say the first thing that comes to mind.

I'll say "cyberpunk."

I'm guessing you'll say "history," or "the eighties," or "dead."

While it's possible to point to current novels and stories that use and abuse cyberpunk themes and motifs, as a thriving sub-genre of science fiction—as a *movement*—cyberpunk has moved on. It petered out even as the Internet boom peaked, but perhaps this isn't strange. The Internet boom was a capitalist triumph, the opposite of classic cyberpunk's anti-establishment attitude. If you want more proof that cyberpunk literature is finished, see the 2003 anthology *The Ultimate Cyberpunk*. It's a reprint anthology, a summation and historical overview. A book end.

But don't get me wrong—just because the revolution's over doesn't mean cyberpunk's not worth reading. In fact, I'm here to argue that cyberpunk isn't dead at all. It has moved to other lands and other media.

Where cyberpunk thrives today is in Japanese *manga* (comics) and *anime* (animated TV shows and movies). Japanese writers and directors have embraced cyberpunk themes, tropes, and styles. They have carried them east to reincarnate cyberpunk in comics and on screen.

We should have expected it. From our point of view, Japan already occupies a proto-cyberpunk future, with its crowded metropolises and cornucopia of techno-gadgets. It makes sense that cyberpunk would resonate with writers and artists living there. The Japanese, though, don't simply mimic cyberpunk; they have picked up the genre and run with it. (It may be that cyberpunk also thrives in Japanese prose literature, but I'm not qualified to say, considering that my Japanese language skills are limited to *Kono sushi no tanjoubi wa?** The international popularity of manga and anime means that plenty of translated titles are available for monoglots like me.)

Let's survey some of the more prominent titles.

Akira

Japanese cyberpunk begins here in an over two thousand page epic that took writer and artist Katsuhiro Ôtomo eight years to serialize. It opens with Tokyo blowing sky high, and the action accelerates from there. Kaneda and Tetsuo are disaffected motorcycle gang members, buddies since childhood. When Tetsuo begins to manifest extreme psychic abilities, he and Kaneda become enmeshed in a battle over a mysterious Power called Akira. Soon everybody wants a piece of them: the military, underground resistance movements, some freaky psychic children. . . .

*When is this sushi's birthday?

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Akira's cyberpunk connections aren't digital, they're visual. Computers, networks, and A.I.s don't come into play, but the design of the story world vibrates with cyberpunk imagery. It's a dark, urban maze populated by the disenfranchised poor and their high-tech oppressors. The pyramidal buildings of Neo-Tokyo in particular evoke *Blade Runner*'s future Los Angeles.

Ôtomo also created an anime version of *Akira,* released in 1988. The film caught the attention of the Western world and is credited with starting the anime craze in America. Andy and Larry Wachowski, creators of *The Matrix,* are longtime manga and anime fans and cite *Akira* as one of their favorites.

Although "Akira" may sound cool and edgy to us, it's actually a common name in Japan. This ultimate horror, this world-destroyer, has a moniker rather like Fred or Dave.

Ghost in the Shell

The *Ghost in the Shell* franchise spans manga, film, television, and games. It begins with the eponymous graphic novel written and drawn by Masamune Shirow. Set in the mid-twenty-first century, *Ghost* depicts a world where "cyber" technology saturates daily life. Almost everyone has a cyberbrain that can store memories and act as a direct interface to the Internet—here called the Net. Hackers engage in direct mind-to-mind attacks to steal information, spy, even take over people's bodies. Expert hackers can turn invisible by hacking others' vision. In this first novel it's sometimes difficult to tell if events are happening in the real world or in cyberspace—the artwork makes little distinction between the two and neither do the characters.

This book follows the adventures of Section 9, the covert operations section of the Japanese National Public Safety Commission. Section 9 specializes in investigating high-tech

Terms

What are these things, manga and anime? *Manga* originally meant Japanese comics, but has evolved to mean any comics and graphic novels that are either drawn in a manga style (big eyes, tiny mouths, crazy hair) or are about themes traditionally found in manga (big robots, big swords, crazy hair). Even Americans now write and draw manga. In Japan, manga is popular with all ages, and is published in weekly or monthly serial magazines that run anywhere from two hundred to over eight hundred pages. Science fiction makes up only a part of the mangasphere: there are manga stories about sports, firefighting, romance, the paranormal, and cooking. As a form of expression, manga is used not only in comics, but in instruction manuals and even on Wanted posters.

Anime means animation. Most Japanese anime starts as manga and then leaps to television or film. Unlike in America, Japanese animation is not limited to cartoons for kids. Anime is simply a style of filmmaking used to tell stories for many age groups and in all genres: drama, action, science fiction, even pornography. You may hear anime referred to as Japanimation. This term is decades out of date and, like "Negro," both old-fashioned and insulting.

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crimes and cyberterrorism. A typical mission for Section 9 might involve stopping a hacker from turning a dignitary's bodyguard into a puppet to be used to assassinate the dignitary.

The star of the book is Major Motoko Kusanagi, whose body is almost completely cybernetic. This brings up one of the main differences between the cyberpunk found in manga and anime, and typical William Gibson-inspired prose works: Japanese cyberpunk often features robots, cyborgs, and everything in between. It loves to explore blurred boundaries between human and machine. Many of the heroes of the works mentioned here are cyborgs or robots. You might say that robotics isn't a core cyberpunk topic, but remember that *Blade Runner,* a hallmark cyberpunk film, is all about artificial people.

In the case of *Ghost in the Shell,* the cybernetic modifications have a very "street" feel. The characters obsess over what they've got and what they want, rather like tattoo addicts. Most of the modifications are used to make people stronger, more menacing, or sexier. Major Kusanagi, for instance, is probably middle-aged (no one is sure) but her form is that of a young, Barbie-doll shaped woman. This makes for an erotically lush comic, but before you condemn it as crass titillation, ask yourself what you would choose if you could design your own body.

Ghost in the Shell, the movie

Ghost in the Shell was adapted to film in 1995 by director Mamoru Oshii. In the movie, Major Kusanagi pursues a computerized super-spy dubbed the Puppetmaster who creates a robot that claims to have a "ghost," or soul. While the manga is energetic, cartoonish, and often whimsical (the word *manga* can translate to "whimsical pictures") this film is serious to the point of ponderousness, and often confusing. Highlights include some intense action/future combat and enormous cityscapes. The film mixes traditional 2-D animation with computer generated graphics—quite groundbreaking at the time. It was the first anime film to be released simultaneously in Japan and the United States.

Ghost in the Shell 2: Man–Machine Interface

The sequel manga to *Ghost in the Shell.* Published in the United States in 2002, it brings comics into the computer age. While the character design is recognizably Shirow's, almost all the backgrounds—rooms, cities, submarines and especially cyberspace—are computer-generated art. The story revolves around Motoko Aramaki, a character similar to and perhaps connected to Major Kusanagi. Aramaki is a security expert for Poseidon Industrial, a floating city. She has her own yacht, a submarine, and a harem of cyborg bodies stashed around the world, all ready to spring into battle. The manga mixes action with lengthy, abstract cyberspace sequences stuffed with technobabble.

Man–Machine Interface's characters operate in augmented reality as well as in virtual reality, and are usually surrounded by floating data windows that only they can see. Masamune also expands the reality of the manga by including side notes that explain elements of the story or even contradict his characters' opinions and ideas. The result is as info-rich as cyberpunk's best data fantasies. This manga not only tells a cyberpunk sto-

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ry, it's a cyberpunk object. Challenging to read, but rewarding.

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex

The *Ghost in the Shell* television series is much more accessible than the manga or anime films, and in my opinion is the most enjoyable of the bunch. Closely related to the first manga, *Stand Alone Complex* chronicles further adventures of Section 9 as they deal with everything from rogue warbots to wine thieves. The half-hour episodes come in two varieties: "Stand Alone," or self-contained stories; and "Complex," an overarching throughline about a super hacker known as The Laughing Man. This is thoughtful science fiction television about cops dealing with futuristic problems; it never pauses to explain to viewers how things work.

The strange thing about *Stand Alone Complex,* is that throughout, Major Kusanagi never wears any pants. Instead she sports a kind of armored thong. Everyone else wears pants—this isn't some No-Pants Land alternate universe. Only the major goes pants-free. I assume this apparel choice was dictated by high-level executives on the show to keep it interesting to the target demographic—teenage boys and me. The show's writers and artists, though, stage a small protest. In one episode the major attends an important briefing wearing a negligee. When her commander asks why, the major answers, "I have no choice."

Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence

The anime sequel has no connection to *Man–Machine Interface,* but is a sequel to the first movie. It was the first anime film to be nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (it didn't win). Once again the question of the meaning of life for artificial beings is a central theme in this story of sex dolls that seem to have souls. The ones that do 1) go on a murderous rampage, and then 2) feel very bad about it and commit suicide. Where are these playmachines getting souls? The answer is disturbing.

Innocence is a gorgeous movie to look at, and animation fans shouldn't miss it. One five-minute sequence of a parade is said to have taken a year to complete. But like the *Matrix* sequels, *Innocence* doesn't build much on the first film of the series, and rolls out so much philosophy and religion you'll find it either deep or sophomoric. Still, it's a serious story, not fluff, and that's a rare thing in science fiction movies.

Serial Experiments Lain

Lain Iwakura isn't a typical cyberpunk hero. She's a shy eighth-grader who doesn't like to turn on her com-

Tooth Bikini Rocket Sister

One area where Japanese manga and anime differ from western fiction is in titles. Perhaps it's a byproduct of translation, but the titles range from distinctive to downright bizarre: New Getter Robo, Fullmetal Alchemist, Gungrave, Fruits Basket. This makes it difficult to tell what a series is about based on its title. What does a family of mystical shapechangers have to do with fruit and/or baskets? As it turns out, more than you would think.

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puter. But after receiving an email from a dead classmate, she starts to explore the online world, here called The Wired. Strange things happen. Lain sees ghosts, has hallucinations, and people report meeting a wild, extroverted double of hers. This is just the beginning of Lain's trip down the digital rabbit hole.

Her story is told in thirteen half-hour episodes by a pool of directors and animators, so the style shifts from episode to episode. The short series is trippy and elliptical, a favorite among those who enjoy a weird intellectual puzzle. Maybe it's just about a troubled teen. Maybe it's about the emergence of a whole new cosmology via computers.

Lain is a good example of how Japanese cyberpunk doesn't hesitate to mix the scientific with the spiritual and magical. But it's not fantasy. In these types of stories, science (or mad science) is often needed to gain access to lands of the dead, ghost worlds, or the collective unconscious.

Battle Angel Alita

Now here's a dystopian vision that will warm the hearts of cynical futurists everywhere. In *Battle Angel Alita,* a manga series written and drawn by Yukito Kishiro, the gap between rich and poor is literal, as the wealthy live in the floating city Tiphares, while the dregs of society toil below in the Scrap Yard. Inhabitants of the Scrap Yard work in factories that supply goods for Tiphares. Inhabitants of Tiphares use up the goods and drop their trash back down onto the Scrap Yard, a slum literally built from Tiphares' garbage. The whole system is designed to support and protect the Tiphareans with no regard for the Yardeans (seeing a trend?).

Almost everyone in the Scrap Yard is a cyborg, and the place looks like a techno-fetishist's dream. Anything you can imagine sticking into or onto a body—spikes, blades, armor, extra limbs—someone's got it. The Scrap Yard's tough guys are in an arms race to become the biggest, the strongest, the most dangerous. Street brawls and gladiatorial combat are popular pastimes.

The hero of the series, though, is a diminutive robot named Alita, found broken and battered on a junk heap by cyberneticist Daisuke Ido. Repaired, Alita has no memory of herself or her origins, so she sets out on a quest of self-discovery. One thing she soon learns is she has amazing combat skills, which come in handy when she assists Ido with his other job: bounty hunter.

The series is a frenetic blend of *Rollerball, Tank Girl,* and *A.I.,* and it stands out from most manga for the quality and detail of the artwork. The action scenes highlight a difference between the visual languages of American and Japanese comics. American comics tend to show static images—if a character is in motion, we see her frozen, held in an instant of time captured like a photograph. Manga uses lines that sweep and blast across the page to indicate movement. In manga, a single panel can relate a long series of motions and actions.

Armitage III: Poly Matrix

One thing the Japanese clearly believe is that there can never be too many sexy, ass-kicking robot babes. *Armitage III* is a movie about a robot cop who lives on Mars and likes to

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wear short-shorts. She partners with a disgraced cop from Earth to investigate a series of murders. The victims, as it turns out, are more than they appear to be. Okay, they're robots.

What sets this film apart from others in the robot hottie genre is its exploration of prejudice against robots. Robots are taking people's jobs, and folks are getting angry, writing letters, and staging protests. In most manga and anime about robots, the society accepts and welcomes them. Perhaps this is because often the humans are becoming robots at the same time that the robots are becoming human, and the line between them is too fuzzy to make any clear distinction.

Armitage was one of the earliest anime films to feature voice acting by Hollywood stars in the American release, in this case Kiefer Sutherland and Elizabeth Berkley. Armitage is the name of Case's shadowy employer in *Neuromancer,* don't forget.

Cowboy Bebop

Lastly, let's remember that the punk in cyberpunk can refer to music as well as to body piercings. The *Cowboy Bebop* television series may not appear to be openly cyberpunk, but it throws its own spin on the genre. For starters, it's a postmodern cut-up of science fiction, westerns, jazz, and rock'n'roll fused together to create a fresh setting. Hero Spike could pass for Gibson's character Case on a shadow-ridden street corner. Spike is a hard-boiled, disaffected loner, a ronin with a dark past who refuses to admit he does good for any reason other than money. And then there's the music. Composed by Yoko Kanno, one of the most famous composers in Japan, *Cowboy Bebop*'s soundtrack mixes rock, blues, funk, and jazz. The tracks drive the show, filling it with energy. Each episode is a concert, each scene a sharp-edged music video.

Set in 2071, the story revolves around the crew of the spaceship *Bebop,* who try to make their living as—wait for it—bounty hunters. Each of the crew has a complex past that comes to light over the course of the series against a backdrop of chases, fights, confrontations, and betrayals. The show was planned from the start for twenty-six episodes only, and ranks as some of the best science fiction television I've seen.

Cowboy Bebop's creator Shinichiro Watanabe also directed two segments of *The Animatrix.* This collection of animated short films set in the world of *The Matrix* serves newcomers as a good gateway drug to full-on anime.

So what lies ahead for cyberpunk? Just as there are sure to be more cyberpunk pastiches published in the West, more robot cops will flourish in Japan. Remember, though, that manga and anime are no longer exclusively Japanese forms, but are becoming worldwide styles. Perhaps as these styles migrate to the west, there will be a blending of old and new leading to hybrid forms. What would manga by Pat Cadigan look like? What would Rudy Rucker's anime be about? ❍

In 1995, Brooks Peck helped found ***Science Fiction Weekly,*** *the first professional SF news and review web site. He is currently a curator at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame in Seattle. Brooks's most recent story, "Climb, Said the Crow," can be found in the anthology* In the Shadow of Evil *from DAW Books.*

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UNDER THE GRAYING SEA

Jonathan Sherwood

Jonathan Sherwood is a science writer for the University of Rochester, in Rochester, New York. "Essentially," he tells us, he tries "to expose the public to the work our scientists are doing, by highlighting cool aspects of their research and writing about the science in a way a non-scientist would understand." The job gives him fodder for story ideas and is a great fact-checking resource. Jonathan has two small daughters, and he and his wife are renovating a house, so he writes nearly all his fiction on a Palm PDA when he has a spare moment. His first sale is dedicated to its inspiration: his four-year-old daughter, Eisabella, who loves telescopes and stargazing.

Ignition.

Tessa's head snapped back into its cradle and her lips slid away from her teeth. The shock slapped the fog off the inside of her helmet and misted her face. Behind her, Loránd groaned as he pressed into his own seat.

And behind him, past two hundred pounding meters of metal and deuterium, the largest protospike engine in history opened its mouth and screamed at the stars.

Nothing went wrong. Not at first.

The holodisplay in the side of her faceplate started running the digits. Four gees. Five. The image of the interior of the cabin blurred under the hammering vibration. Joints in her hips and spine cracked as they were pressed flat. The respirator, locked in her jaw, swelled, forcing oxygen down her throat to keep her lungs from collapsing. Her suit constricted. Her knuckles popped. She was sure she was probably yelling but her eardrums had been shut down. The helmet battered her temples. Eight gees. Nine.

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The blur of the cabin turned to a haze as her eyes deformed under their own weight. The tiny lasers of the holodisplay lit automatically, drawing images directly onto her retina; the digits of the gee counter and the stark white curve of the moon. The crescent grew as they plunged from their high lunar orbit to hurtle past by less than four hundred meters as a brilliant streak of burning metal. Halfway around, pulling out of the slingshot, the mad rush would end. She watched the image in her eye. Watched the brilliant white crest glow brighter and whiter against the black emptiness. The black and white, and halfway around the moon, the unbearably sallow gray.

Carbon spokes, pinioned into her ribs, kept them from splitting. Microwaves impelled blood through capillaries. Her eyes rolled back white and she gagged as always as she gave up control to the respirator.

And still the protospike screamed.

Eleven. Twelve.

She knew that her parents, like half the world, would be watching—standing out on porches, pausing on the fields of late-night ball games and leaning out of moving cars to watch the brilliant glare of the protospike awaken like a new star in the sky and dive into the moon. It had happened every thirty days for the past eighty years as the crews built the stellar bridge. Every thirty days.

But still, everyone paused.

She'd been three when she first saw it. Once, when she used to sleep on her father's lap as the riding mower rattled up and down the smooth hills of their lawn, he stopped and pinched the gas tube until the engine sputtered to quiet. "Would you like a star?" he whispered into her hair. With the back of grass-stained fingernails he slid her hair behind an ear and gently nudged her awake. The sky was a cloudless, near-black blue, bright only where the sun had just dipped below the distant line of maples. The silver arc of the moon floated just above the dwindling violets and purples. Crickets were waking. A hiss rippled through the fields around the house.

"Tess?" he whispered again, his soft voice rising out of the breeze. "How would you like a star?" She barely opened an eye and didn't move from where she'd sweated into his shirt. He reached out his arm, making sure she was watching, and stretched out his fingers as if wrapping them around the moon. The breeze ebbed and the road on the other side of the old maples was quiet. She sat upright, squinting at his outstretched hand, to his square features pulled into deep thought, and back out to his hand. She didn't notice him eyeing his watch.

"Presto-mesto," he said, and a white star, framed perfectly in the moon's crescent, flickered to life. Tessa breathed through her mouth. It moved, slowly at first, but more and more quickly toward the edge of the moon. Her face was cooling quickly away from his chest. "Should we name it after you?" He picked away a few strands stuck to her cheek. Her eyes were transfixed. "I think we should." They watched as it approached the limb of the crescent, suspended in the thick smell of cut grass, gasoline, and his old shirt. "I'll tuck it behind the moon for now," he said, reaching up and brushing a hand along the sky. The star slipped around the edge of the moon and vanished.

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Her breath barely passed her open lips.

The evening kept still.

Long moments lingered before she turned to him, brow twitching slightly, eyes searching his face. The breeze had not returned, and the crickets seemed to silence. They looked at each other in the hush.

Long after she went to bed and watched the moon ease itself down the panes in her window, the fields were still quiet.

For four years the scene was repeated every thirty days, whether he halted her and her mother in the middle of a grocery parking lot or woke her in the middle of the night to stick their heads out under the window sash. It took those four years before classmates laughed at her for believing it was named for her. She didn't say anything to her father, but he noticed one night she was watching him instead of her star. Neither of them mentioned it when the next thirtieth day came and passed unnoticed.

Tessa's limbs ached as her flesh was ground against bones. A red warning light flashed on her retina, then a diagnostic schematic, a flurry of code lines as the CV attempted reroutes, and a flash of all-clear green before her vision was back to the onrushing limb of the moon and the green digits counting seventeen. Eighteen.

She'd written one of her first book reports about the bridge. She'd laid out her ebook on her windowsill one evening and downloaded page after page about its creation, including the famous, century-old video from Tokyo. Out of a scruffy lab of bare wires and tubes, a nervous, grinning scientist tossed a grapefruit into a small metal ring, and without so much as a flash or a blink, the grapefruit was suddenly dropping out of a second ring at the end of the table. Overnight, conversations turned to uses for bridges. Walk from your parlor in Louisiana to your mother's kitchen in Scotland. Ride your bicycle to a business meeting across the Pacific. Airline stocks plummeted but eased back once sobriety settled in: The tiny, two-meter wormhole had used more power in four seconds than all of Tokyo could in a day, and no amount of ingenuity seemed able to bring Mom's kitchen within walking distance. "The first wormhole," she had scrawled under the twilight stars, "was stuck."

Twenty-one gees. Twenty-two. Their tiny compartment, long ago sardonically nicknamed a "Concussion Vehicle" by its pilots, was housed in a massive electromagnetic sheath that pulled at the slight attraction of water molecules in their bodies to counteract some of the acceleration. *Not enough,* Tessa thought. The spokes lifted her ribs for another breath, dragging with them tendon and cartilage twenty times their normal weight. The view of the looming lunar surface suddenly rolled as the protospike twisted, corrected course, and twisted again. The magnetosheath stabilized different tissue with different force; blood and neural tissue more, fat and bone much less. The protospikes could supposedly deliver up to forty-eight gees of acceleration once they spun up to full bore, but the hardest anyone had ever been pushed yet was twenty-four-point-one. Tessa's last four launches had all been about twenty-four-point-one, with every launch a thousandth of a gee faster than the last. The far side of the bridge was always accelerating away, and they were always pushing

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harder to catch up. Each launch just a little faster. Her blind eyes widened as the counter moved past twenty-four. And to twenty-*five*. The digits switched to red. The impellers pushed against blood. Her larynx vibrated under the respirator as she watched the impossible; twenty-*six*.

A bridge was cheaper than only one kind of transportation—stellar. Though complex, arduous, and outlandishly expensive, the bridge held out a promise to humankind that no one had thought possible. To build a bridge to the stars, one ring would reside near Earth, while the other ring would be placed at the destination. Getting the second ring to that destination so many light years away, however, was the challenge. The scientific world struggled, hoping for another miracle, but none came. The second ring would have to be pushed to a nearby star by simple, old-fashioned, mass-rejection rockets. Getting it there would take two hundred years, but humanity's expedition to the stars would begin.

In any other decade the bridge would have remained only a dream, but the world was at peace, economies were expanding, and generosity was chic. They built it in twelve years. Economies contracted, but the money flowed. Other sciences were curtailed, but they built the rings. One orbited the Moon and the other was sent toward the nearby dwarf star, Lalande 21185. Lalande had a halo rich in complex elements—a perfect first stop on the journey into the stars. Every thirty days the bridge would be opened to refuel the far ring's engines and perform maintenance. The world watched the launch of the far ring, nicknamed Betty, already seen as a symbol of better days as living conditions in smaller countries began to dip and petty squabbles grew to small conflicts. The golden age collapsed and it was back to a world in flux.

At twenty-eight gees, Tessa's fear became panic. Her heart raced, but the respirator kept her breathing even. She felt as if she was suffocating. She thought her skin would split where the helmet was hitting her and draging itself down either side of her face. Her shoulders dislocated one after the other and despite the impellers moving her blood, her vision was tunneling, the distorted image of the lunar surface tearing by as they dropped through their perigee. Only seconds now . . . Twenty-*nine*. The spokes lifted her ribs for another breath.

"Why do they have to send people?" her father had asked when she had shown him the eyelets drilled into her ribs. His first trip off-world. Just to see her. "Can't they automate it somehow?"

He'd tried to hide it, but she'd caught the look on his face. She'd regretted showing him then. It was one thing to hear about the eyelet implants, the nauseating neuro-mineral injections and other procedures pilots had to undergo to survive a launch. Quite another to see fifty-six holes perforating your daughter's chest. She tucked her shirt in without looking up.

"They do automate it, most of it at least. But it's too important not to back it up with a human presence. The simplest programming error and it's all over." They sat alone at a small table in the dark wood-paneled pilots' lounge, looking out a wide window into the gridwork of the orbiting Darkside Station. The moon's surface moved perceptibly below; the tourists' observation deck above but far away enough for them to feel private. And the near end of the stellar bridge, the thirty-meter ring called

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Alice, lit up by a plethora of floodlights and flashers. She watched his face flicker with their pulses, cheeks and wrinkles sitting younger in the zero gravity. A gentle chime sounded in the lounge.

"Does that mean their launch has started?"

Tessa nodded. "They'll be here in eighteen minutes. I hate to say it, but it's not a lot to see. About a half second before they get here, the magnetic cocoon jettisons the concussion vehicle from the protospike, sending it through those rings." She pointed out the window and he leaned against the glass to see. "Those rings magnetically guide the CV during the last second so it hits Alice dead-center. But the CV is moving so fast that you probably won't even see it. It'll go through to the other ring, Betty, and come to a dead stop. They send the gamma burst directly after it and that gets absorbed by Betty's collector to recharge her engines. Then we do maintenance."

"How can you handle a dead stop?" he said, still looking out the window.

"It's not really a dead stop at all. Really just the opposite. Betty's been accelerating away toward Lalande for eighty years now and she's reaching relativistic speeds. She's just over 5 percent light speed now, so when we go through, we're actually being instantly accelerated to her fifteen thousand kilometers per second, and the energy to do that has to come from somewhere. Most of it turns into a physical drag on Betty, and the rest of it comes out of . . . us." She realized she was unconsciously fingering an eyelet. "Our body temperatures drop to near absolute zero instantly. Most of the hardware in the CVs are microwave heaters. We're sort of cooked back to normal in about six millionths of a second."

She'd trailed off near the end. The same pang of wishing she hadn't told him the details.

"That's why we go through the launch," she continued, quieter. "We have to do everything we can to minimize the drag on Betty. The faster we go into Alice, the less drag on Betty as she yanks us up to speed."

She played with the sealed straw in the Chardonnay bonded to the table. The lounge was perfectly quiet, lit only by small table lamps and the flashers from outside the window. It was a long moment before she realized he was looking at her in the reflection. Had been.

"They want to name the town park after you," he said when their eyes met in the glass. He smiled and focused his gaze outward. Distant lights reflected under his brows. "Tessa J. Bruncsak Park." He smiled wider, turning toward her. "Did I tell you I got asked for my autograph again? At the gas station. And your mother's Bible study group bought her a telescope kit, but I'm having a terrible time trying to put the thing together."

Sipping at her straw, Tessa just smiled. Another chime sounded and his eyebrows raised a bit.

"They're approaching perigee. They'll be here in about a minute."

"Does it hurt?"

The question caught her off guard, and though he'd asked it, it seemed to catch him off guard too. He seemed flustered.

"Yeah. Yeah, it does, sort of. But it's not so bad. It's only eighteen minutes, and it goes by quicker than you'd think." She watched him across the table, nodding slowly. Trying to convince himself.

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"You couldn't tell when you saw my quarters," she said, "but I get a fantastic view out my window. Every few days I wake up to have the entire Earth lighting up my room. It's nothing like moonlight. It's warm. Palpable, even. I can usually tell where Ohio is. I lie there and stare at the whole globe, and do you know what I'm thinking? That I'm so proud of us. I'm so proud of us as a species. We may be absorbed in our regular lives like any other animal, but we came together, just once, just this one time, and we did something impossible. We stepped beyond every expectation we ever, ever had of ourselves. And I lie there thinking, 'Here I am. Part of this one, giant, unimaginable baby step.' It's worth everything I can give it."

"But there's still something bothering you."

Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

"I'm your dad," he pretended to shrug it off. "I can tell things."

Tessa scratched the side of her nose, looked at her drink and out the window before answering.

"It's the other side," she said directly to him, feeling as if she'd slipped from stellar pilot to little girl cringing from the darkness in the closet.

"It's not the acceleration or all the things that might go wrong. It's the sky out there. It's not black. It's *gray*."

His brow furrowed.

"When you go through that bridge and it closes behind you, you are utterly . . . you are *unchangeably* alone. Around here space is black because you've got the Sun and the Moon and Earth all radiating light, and space is just black in comparison. You can see stars of course, but it's nothing like out there. Out there you're thirty *trillion* kilometers from *anything*. The sun is so far away you can't tell it from any other star in the sky. And with nothing stronger than starlight around, you see more stars than you'd believe. In every direction the sky is dusted with them. And between any two stars is another and another. The longer you stay out there, the more your eyes adjust and the more you see until you can hardly distinguish them apart and before you know it, there is no more blackness, just a thin gray mist of stars in all directions. And it's always there, always in your peripheral vision, always reminding you how unfathomably far away you are from everyone and everything. It's like suffocating under a crushing emptiness. Like drowning, unable to get back to the real world, watching the surface recede."

She pushed the straw around the sealed glass.

"For four hours you're just praying that the bridge will open up the way it should and take you back. For four hours you almost can't concentrate because you feel how horrifyingly delicate that thread is that connects you back. That thread breaks, and you drown. For four hours, you pray."

Though it never seemed like he'd moved, she realized he was holding her hand on the table. Three gentle chimes sounded over the intercom. A brilliant orange blaze as Alice spun open and a flash past the window as the concussion vehicle hurtled into the ring. Over the intercom, the fast exchange between the Darkside controllers and the pilots on the other side. The blinding glare of the gamma burst laser pumping energy into Betty's collector. And three seconds later the bridge shut, leaving tourists on the distant observation deck still snapping pictures.

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She'd watched it all reflect off his face. He hadn't taken his eyes off her. "*I* am with you," he said. "Always."

In her launches she never actually saw Darkside Station, much less Alice. After lifting out of perigee, the ring would clear the lunar horizon and hit her and Loránd before she could even catch the streak on her retina. This time her eyes were rolled back into her head anyway.

The acceleration halted abruptly, throwing her head forward as the magnetosheath ejected their tiny pod and the protospike rocketed past the station. The sudden relief of pressure always made her lungs feel like bursting before the respirator equalized itself. She pulled her eyes forward and her retina was awash for half a second in the warm, fire-like glow of the wormhole before the image abruptly changed to a status grid. *The heaters worked.* The impellers released her eardrums and the flood of voices from Darkside Control rushed in.

"CV One, this is Darkside, you are out-transit, awaiting go."

No time to mince a syllable. Thirty-one fusion generators were exhausting themselves to keep the bridge open for its twenty-one seconds. The respirator snapped itself out of her teeth. The autopilot had already pulled their tiny pod to the edge of the ring and anchored them. Green lights fluttered across her vision. "Betty reports All Green." Instantly her vision switched to the forward camera as she heard Loránd relay, "Confirm All Green." The sound was not his voice just as her report wasn't hers. Neither of their larynxes was functional. Their helmets read their lips. Tessa looked around, the forward camera spinning to match the twitches of her blind eyes. She saw Betty's arc, so much thinner and weaker than Alice's. Cables holding it together. Small micro-meteor holes, pointed out with flashing crosshairs and dates they were logged in by previous crews. The gallium-antimony collector, the eight ion engines with their invisible thrust, more meteorite damage then usual, but everything in order. "Betty Visual All Green," her synthetic voice sounded immediately.

Loránd did not confirm.

"Loránd! I—Darkside, this is—"

"CV One, we've got his vitals," Control cut her off. "He's blacked out, Tess. Darkside firing." Neither they nor Tessa could stop to check on her copilot. No abort. They could never abort.

The forward camera twitched as she watched. The gamma burst fired. Through the wormhole, Darkside Station seemed a few meters away but was nearly invisible as light radiating from it was stretched and robbed of its energy, dropping down from the visible to the deep infrared. She could only make out ruddy outlines where the sun glinted off metal. By the time the gamma burst came through the bridge it was little more than a red glow warming the collector.

"Darkside. Need emergency medical ready on in-transit."

The refueling took the final twelve seconds. Forty-eight percent of that energy would be used to reopen the bridge for their return journey. Forty-eight percent to open it again in thirty days for the next crew. Only 4 percent went into propulsion. No room for errors.

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"Already in scramble, CV One. We're reporting an acceleration anomaly."

"Confirm, we're—"

The gamma burst ended and lights on her retina flickered as bridge began shutdown.

"Just hang in there, Tess. Darkside out."

Silently, the orange glow in Betty's maw evaporated, leaving Tessa blinking at darkness before Betty's arcing silhouette began to take shape against the countless billions of tiny, unblinking stars.

"Loránd!" her electronic voice rang out. "Ceevee, give me the internal camera." Lasers played through her cornea and the image of the cabin appeared. She could hear the cam above her head hum as her eyes focused it on the seat behind her. Inside his helmet, Loránd's eyes were closed. "Loránd!" she tried to yell, but the lipreader only sounded calm. "Ceevee, medical report on Loránd."

"Report not yet complete."

"Results so far."

"Commander Loránd Delago: microfractures in left femur, right femur, left ulna—"

Loránd's eyes fluttered, crossing occasionally, and dipped back beneath his lids.

"Ceevee, give Loránd internal cam. Hey, pal, can you hear me? Loránd?" His eyes stopped fluttering as the lasers glinted off them. Another camera above her head hummed.

"What happened?" His synthetic voice was steady.

"You blacked out. Control said something went wrong with the acceleration, did you catch that?"

"No. You've got blood out your nose."

Tessa's view shifted as she looked down on herself, red streaks edging down both cheeks. Twinges of dull pain pulsed behind her eyes. She lifted her faceplate and wiped her nose with the slick plastic of her glove. Her shoulder jerked painfully back into place.

"Ceevee, full medical. Report."

"Commander Tessa Bruncsak: microfractures in left femur, right radius, right scapula. Minor hemorrhages in all extremities. Possible major hemorrhage in upper torso. Soft tissue report in seven minutes. Commander Loránd Delago: mircrofractures in left femur, right femur, left ulna, right ulna, left radius, left tibia. Major fractures in left ulna, right ulna, left ribs four, five, and six. Minor hemorrhages in all extremities. Possible major hemorrhage in upper torso. Cyclimorph injections imminent. Soft tissue report in six minutes."

"My rib," came his voice. His larynx was starting to recover, as was Tessa's natural eyesight.

"What is it?"

"It hurts. A lot." She could see his hand moving along his side. The thick fingers of his suit prodding beneath his arm. "The spoke broke."

"Ceevee, can you abbreviate that soft tissue report?" she asked, and twitched as the opiate needle tapped her armpit inside her suit.

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"Under two minutes."

"Don't worry, Control said they knew what went wrong and would have full medical teams ready as soon as we're in-transit." They both knew the procedure. There was no way Control would pull a team back from the other side. If something was wrong, it was the team's job to fix it. Scamper away from the problem and they might never reconnect with Betty. Painkiller warmth spread from her armpit. "Ceevee, what was the acceleration malfunction? Check your logs and everything Darkside beamed us."

"No malfunctions recorded."

Though they were not facing each other, they read each other's expressions.

"What do you mean, 'no malfunctions'?" said Loránd. "How many gees did we just pull?"

"Thirty-two-point-eight," came the ship's voice.

Thirty-two-point-eight. Nearly eight gees harder than anyone had pulled before. It was several seconds before Tessa was able to respond.

"Darkside said 'anomaly,' not 'malfunction.' What . . . Ceevee, what was the anomaly?"

"Darkside reports link requiring acceleration of thirty-two-point-eight gravities."

"Well, no kidding."

"Soft tissue report complete," chimed the ship's voice.

"Report."

"Commander Tessa Bruncsak: minor hemorrhages in all extremities. Minor muscular damage in all extremities. Minor hemorrhages in maxillary sinus and right renal cortex. No emergency medical action required. Commander Loránd Delago: minor hemorrhages in all extremities. Minor muscular damage in all extremities. Major hemorrhage in chest cavity. Left rib six penetrating lung, diaphragm, pancreas, depressing kidney. Continuing blood loss. Emergency medical action required."

The lasers played Loránd's silent expression across her retina.

"Ceevee, what medical action is required?"

"Transfusion and surgery."

Tessa's lips moved, but the lip-reader could not discern the intended word.

"Ceevee," said Loránd, his real voice starting to crack through, "report prognosis without treatment."

"Death from blood loss in forty to eighty minutes."

"I can make the impellers reduce the hemorrhaging," said Tessa. "I can set them to push most of the blood in the area away from your rib."

"There aren't enough. Only a couple dozen impellers in the seat that can reach. Too many arteries."

"I can vary the impellers. I can make them back up blood flow in one artery and flip to another while blood starts moving again in the first. They should be able to alternate pretty quickly if you don't move too much. Ceevee, can the impellers move blood in the damaged arteries at least twice as fast as it's currently flowing through Loránd's diaphragm?"

"Impellers can operate at two-point-two times current flow."

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"What about organ damage from lack of blood?"

"Pancreatic necrosis likely in two-hundred to four-hundred-twenty minutes."

"Forget about my pancreas."

"If this works, the capillaries will still leak a lot, but it should keep you alive until we can get back. Or nearly so."

"Nearly so." The voice simulator couldn't reconstruct sarcasm. Or resignation.

"If you don't make it, I'll pull the heaters in your suit and the cabin. I can even use some of the CV's coolant to chill you. They'll be able to revive you. Okay? Ceevee, give me the impeller schematics."

Tessa's eyes flooded with bright lines, straight yellow streaks where the microwaves in Loránd's couch could push; red and blue curves where the edges of his diaphragm, rib, and pancreas intersected. A cursor followed the movements of her hands as she set about moving the yellow streaks about.

"You okay?"

"I can feel it every time you switch them on." His voice worked against the crippled lung.

"Sorry. Does it hurt?"

"Yup."

"I think I can make this work. At least for a while."

"Hey Tess? I'm starting to shake."

She didn't answer for a long minute. "Yeah, well, me too." Despite the open faceplate, her breath made the inside of the helmet humid. She had to keep stopping to breathe and think of open spaces. Of trees and cut grass. The legs of her suit automatically constricted. Ceevee must have detected the onset of shock.

"I didn't make a big deal out of saying goodbye to Marith," he said. "I don't like making a big deal of it because I don't want her to think I'm worried. She'd get more nervous if she thought I was. I just gave her a peck and told her I'd be back for dinner."

"You'll be back." She nudged another yellow streak and could see him twitch.

"We're trying to get pregnant again."

She closed her eyes, teeth pressed tight. Open spaces and the sound of a breeze on the treetops. Over and over. The cursor was shaking with her hand.

"Tess? Tessa?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to die out here. I'm not afraid of dying but I don't want to die way out here. I don't want to die in this. Promise me, will you? Promise me you'll get me back. If I gotta die I don't want it to be out here. Promise me, Tess."

The thought crowded into her head. The emptiness. The gray. "I promise, pal."

"For real."

"I promise for real."

* * *

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For a long time, Tessa worked the impellers in silence. She used every impeller in Loránd's seat to hold back the blood flow, and, though it wasn't perfect, it was working better than she'd expected. The pain in her head relaxed to a dull ache, but she was growing aware of pangs in her legs, pelvis, and back. "I've been thinking, the only reason the linkup system would demand that we pull thirty-two-point-eight gees would be if our heaters couldn't reheat us properly, or—"

"Or Betty is moving a hell of lot faster than she should be."

"Or Betty is moving a hell of a lot faster than she should be," she repeated, slowly. "When we first came out-transit, I noticed way more micrometeor hits than usual in Betty's frame. Ceevee, shut down my holodisplay."

With a flicker, the outline of Loránd's diaphragm disappeared. Blinking hard several times, she made out the instrument lights first, then the dimmer colors of her suit, her reflection in the canopy above, and finally the giant curving stretch of Betty's rim arcing away out of the CV's floods. Ceevee had docked them as usual against Betty's side, giving them a tremendous view out the canopy. The far side of the ring's delicate, spiderweb network of cables stood out black; dark against the mist of stars beyond. She switched on the holodisplay again to highlight the new pockmarks that tiny bits of dust and interstellar debris had made in Betty's thin skin in the last thirty days. Particularly in the series of linkage terminals that ensured a proper connection home.

"I'm going out, Lor. I have to start repairing some of Betty's acne and make sure the linking system is All Green like Ceevee says. Okay?"

"Don't leave."

"I've gotta go, pal, you know that. I'm going to make sure we can get home, okay? Stay on the radio." She spread the spoke cage, unbuckled from her seat and turned so she could see him. He was wincing. "I'm decompressing the cabin."

The decompression was silent and only noticeable as her suit swelled slightly. She watched his face and could see him wince harder as his own suit stiffened against his broken rib. She had been on thirty-two launches with him and they'd worked well together. To have him suddenly unable to move . . .

The magnetic soles of her boots clung to the rivets in Betty's lithium skin as she stepped out of the concussion vehicle. She stood in the CV's floodlights for a moment, the brightest object for a trillion kilometers, before clipping in her tethers and walking along the great rim. It stretched before her like a black arch; each slow, measured step throwing small shoots of pain up her legs, sounding small and echoless in her suit as the endless gray sky rose and sank around her. Beneath her. Her faceplate fogged slightly with each breath.

"Talk to me about Marith," she said, wishing the lip-reader were still on. He didn't need to hear the uneasiness in her real voice. "Talk to me about this baby thing."

"We kind of just decided. I don't know." His voice was steadier than hers. "She grew up in a big family and always wanted like four or five kids. She said she had noisy Thanksgivings and that that was one of the

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best times of the year for her. Everybody around the table all talking at once." He stopped suddenly, but continued. Tessa reached the line of link terminals a quarter up the rim and switched on her helmet lights. "I only had a brother so when I imagine a noisy Thanksgiving it sounds like chaos. But she'd talk about how everyone could somehow talk all at the same time but keep a conversation going, and how somebody in one of the conversations was always laughing. The more she described it, the more, I don't know, friendly it seemed."

She shortened the tethers to hold her, kneeling, against the ring and punched in the passcode over the linkage panels. Betty's silvery skin glinted brightly in her helmet lights as she unfolded the lids and keyboards and watched green lights appear one by one. She wanted to double-check.

"Ceevee, report on linking terminal status."

"Linking terminals report All Green."

"Is there enough power to re-establish the bridge?"

"There is."

"Are the timers compensating for relativistic dilation?"

"They are."

She stared at the bank of green lights under her helmet lights. Everything working. The link between Alice and Betty was a tenuous one; Alice had to house all the power to generate the wormhole to save precious weight on Betty. But it meant the crews couldn't initiate the bridge from this end, and couldn't communicate until the bridge opened. Connection relied solely on both rings' perfectly coordinated timing.

"Is there anything at all that may interfere with a proper linkup?"

"There is not."

She quietly let out a long breath.

"Sounds good," he said. "At least we know we're going home. One way or another."

"We need to figure out why we're going too fast."

"The engines?"

"I can't see how. They're ion engines. They could never produce that much acceleration in just thirty days." She closed the panel and extended the tethers until she stood on the outer edge of the ring, the lights of the concussion vehicle far below. She threw a glare at the stars around her.

Loránd spoke. "What if the last team's in-transit didn't produce the expected amount of drag?"

"Maybe, but eight gees worth? What does that translate to in kilometers per hour? We don't even know how fast we're going now. We don't even have a way to check direction. We could even be way off . . . Ceevee, were there any course corrections since the last team? Major ones, not corrections for micro-impacts."

"Betty reports ninety major course corrections."

"Holy . . ." began Loránd.

"Ceevee, show me Lalande 21185." An invisible laser drew crosshairs on her retina around the image of a single, dim star in the field before them. "Show me our heading." A second crosshair came into her vision, superimposed on the first.

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"Maybe one of the engines is pushing it off kilter."

"That wouldn't explain our speed," she replied, almost to herself. She stared at the starfield, at Lalande with its glowing crosshairs, at the stars around it, one by one. All of them hundreds of times more distant. Looking at each with suspicion. So distant. So alone. The stars surrounded her. Waiting.

"Ceevee, show me the nearest star on our lateral—the nearest one perpendicular to our line of travel."

"Up and to your left. Wolf 359."

She turned and saw another crosshair glowing around another nondescript star.

"Ceevee, check the star's position against where it's predicted to be in relation to Betty."

"What's up, Tess?"

"Hang on. Ceevee, you got that?"

"Calculating . . . Wolf 359 is 0.0023 degrees ahead of predicted position."

"Lor! We're drifting sideways! There's a gravity source out here. There's got to be some huge mass pulling us off course." She looked around at the silent stars, their billion trillion silent numbers. "Ceevee, show me the course corrections. Graph them over time." A grid with fluttering dots superimposed itself over her vision. The dots started infrequently but appeared more and more clustered toward the edge of the graph.

"Whoa," said Loránd.

"You seeing this?" She looked down to him.

"They're getting more frequent. Looks exponential."

"We're bearing down on top of it," she whispered. "Something huge. Planetoid or brown dwarf. Bigger maybe."

"Tess, the last correction was only four minutes before we out-transited. The next one will be probably be any second now."

"Ceevee, alert when Betty corrects course."

The ship confirmed. Tessa watched the stars through the grid hovering in her vision.

"Ceevee, can you extrapolate from course corrections to estimate the amount of mass needed to drag Betty into current course?"

"No. Distance to gravity source unknown."

"If it's been pulling us off course for thirty days and we haven't hit it yet, we know the lower limit. What's that?"

"Zero-point-two solar masses," said the ship. "Assuming imminent impact."

Though he didn't say anything, Tessa knew Loránd was also staring at the starfield ahead. Nothing but the gray dust.

"Betty initiating course correction," Ceevee suddenly announced.

"Ceevee, override course correction!" shot Tessa.

"Course alterations require—"

"Lor! Back me up. Confirm the override."

"Tess, we're not supposed—"

"Lor! Override it!"

"Ceevee, I concur. Override Betty course correction."

Ceevee confirmed. For several seconds neither of them said anything.

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The ion engines' push was so light they couldn't feel anything, but, within half a minute, a small yellow warning light began blinking in both their helmets.

"Tess?"

"Ceevee, show me Lalande 21185." A crosshair fluttered to life. "Show me current heading." A second crosshair. Barely to the right of the first. "Ceevee, use spectrometer to scan in a straight line from Lalande 21185 to current heading and continue past heading for five degrees. Report any sudden Doppler shifts in starlight."

"Report ready in four minutes."

"Tess, what are you doing? You're letting us drift off course."

"We're already off course—way off course. We've been curving for days. The course corrections are just reorienting us back toward Lalande, not making up for the curve; they're not compensating for the sideways drift at all and we're not going to know how far we've drifted or how much farther we're *going* to drift until we find out how big that mass is." She was kneeling at the linkage terminals again, tethers tight, watching the computers count down the seconds until they'd anchor Alice's long reach again. Lorand coughed. A short, wet cough.

"Ceevee," his voice was strained, "clear my faceplate."

"You okay?" She leaned over the terminals, looking down into the CV's floods.

"Breaths are just hurting. Thank god for zero-gee or my suit legs would be full of blood. Nice job with the impellers. I'm lasting longer than Ceevee said." Tessa looked at the chronometer on the terminal. They'd been out-transit for an hour and twenty-one minutes.

"Spectrometer report ready."

"Report."

"Fast Doppler shift patterns detected." A crosshair appeared further to the right of Lalande and their heading. "Gravitational lensing likely. Necessary mass; eighteen-point-seven solar masses."

Tessa's fingers gripped Betty's metal as she stared at the crosshairs. The air in her helmet began to feel thick and inadequate at the same time. Eighteen-point-seven solar masses. A black hole. A singularity.

"Tessa, I have to get out of here. I have to see Marith."

She looked down at the CV, saw the crystallized blood from her nose on the back of her glove. Eighteen-point-seven . . . drifting invisibly across their path. Eighteen-point-seven solar masses.

"I have to get back!" he yelled. She could hear his sounds as he thrashed about inside his helmet. Animal sounds.

"Stop it!" she shot back at him. Louder than she meant to. "We'll get back. That's not a problem. When the bridge opens we go back and tell them what's going on. They'll send a team through, or something, a whole protospike maybe to push Betty out of harm's way. They'll open it in—" she glanced at the linkage chronometer "—two hours and forty minutes. Just hold on." His cough sounded in stereo in her ears, but he was calming himself. Muttering military relaxation mantras.

"Ceevee, from the Doppler shift, estimate our speed. How much time do we have before we reach the mass?"

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"Blue-shift estimation at seventeen thousand kilometers per second. Tidal force threshold approached in two hours fifty-four minutes."

She checked the chronometer again. Two hours and forty minutes until transit. Her lips moved several times but didn't form words. Fourteen minutes. They'd make it home fourteen minutes before the gravity tore Betty apart. Fourteen minutes to scramble some kind of team, come back and push Betty out of harm's way.

"That gives us what?" said Loránd. "Thirteen, fourteen minutes? Talk about cutting it close." He was trying to sound flippant, trying to negate his panic, but his breaths were short and uneven.

Fourteen minutes. She looked at the linkage terminals before her. It could be done. How quickly could Darkside assemble a team? No time for a proper protospike launch—but they wouldn't need one. The drag on Betty would actually help. Five, maybe six minutes if alert crews were ready. That left eight minutes for them to use whatever heavy-lift thrusters they could pull through. If they could bring a whole protospike through in time, it would have power enough to shift Betty. At seventeen thousand kilometers per second, even a moderate nudge would make a huge difference. It could work. They'd also need to recharge Betty again and Tessa wasn't sure the Darkside generators could rev up enough to fire another gamma burst in just five minutes. Again, it would be a mad scramble on Darkside, but it could work.

She started reprogramming the timers, deleting "thirty days" and typing the digits for the scant five minutes—

No, wait.

Her gloves hovered over the blinking terminal.

"Lor," she said. So expressionless it could have been her electronic voice.

"I'm here."

"We can't open the bridge."

"What? I've got All Green across the board. Even—"

"Lor," she said harder. "We can't *let* it. The gravity. We don't feel it because we're freefalling toward it, but if we open a wormhole back to Darkside. . . ."

Gravity. The pull of eighteen-point-seven solar masses would travel right through the bridge. Radiate out of Alice. Darkside would probably survive, but larger masses, like the Moon, like Earth, what would happen? Twenty-one seconds of unnaturally bent space rippling out of Darkside at the speed of light. . . . When they had out-transited there was probably some gravitational effect felt even then, though it would be a long time before anyone understood why. But they were falling toward the mass at almost twenty thousand kilometers per second, and the gravity's strength would rise exponentially. In the four hours between transits it would be hundreds of times stronger. How much damage would eighteen-point-seven solar masses do in twenty-one seconds? Earthquakes? Tsunamis? How many would die?

Neither of them spoke, but Loránd's staccato breathing sounded close in her ears. For the barest of seconds her vision wavered as she comprehended—*felt*—the emptiness around them. Felt the trillions of kilometers of freezing nothingness between them and home. She thought of her dad,

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sitting in the pilot's lounge, of watching his face when she said, "utterly, unchangeably, alone." Even with eyes closed, she could feel the sky around her getting grayer and grayer, as more stars quietly filled in the back rows to watch.

"Tess?"

"Yeah."

"You're the physics guru," he said. "Get us back." And then, quieter, "You gotta get us back."

She paid out the tethers and walked a few meters to the set of propulsion terminals. She knew he could see her in the floods. She studied the terminals, the full batteries, started running figures in her head. The weight of the ring. Reaction masses. Engine thrusts.

"Ceevee," she said, "shut down all of Betty's engines. Loránd, confirm."

He didn't question. "Ceevee, shut down Betty's engines."

For the first time in eighty years the terminals showed the engines shut down. Loránd coughed, and again asked Ceevee to clear his faceplate. She was glad she couldn't see him past the floods.

"Hey Tess? Tess, I can't stop shaking."

"You were talking about Thanksgiving before. They don't celebrate that in Brazil. Where'd you grow up?"

"I grew up in Campinas but my family moved to California when I was ten. Marith was born in California, too, but we didn't meet until Darkside. She's just about done with her doctorate, did you know that? Less than a year now, with honors, too. We've been thinking about renting a place on Luna to start a family until my tour here is over. Then I think we both want to go back to Cali. Growing up on the moon would be too lonely for a kid."

He talked as she worked. She took an exacting inventory of everything Betty had on her; everything from the power of individual engines to the mass of her rivets.

When she'd escorted her father through the corridors of Darkside at the end of his trip, he bumped along in the way newcomers to zero-G always did. She helped to steady him as she drifted, easily, needing only occasional brushes with the corridor's rungs to move herself. She guided him toward the shuttle port, her free hand holding his small bag of belongings. "Your mother was right," he chuckled as he reached both hands out toward an approaching wall. "She would have hated floating around like this." Tessa pushed gently and eased him through a circular door.

He'd watched her on a transit. She'd had him in the back of her mind the whole time she'd been away on Betty. It seemed an easy transit that time; seemed warm instead of cold. Not so far away. After the perfunctory in-transit medical exam she found him in the waiting room. He was smiling but she could tell he was nervous and had probably had more than one drink in the pilots' lounge during her four-hour absence. He never mentioned it, though.

When they'd floated into the docking hall, it bustled with people prepping the shuttle. She handed her father's bag to a nearby worker, who did a double-take before stiffening and yelling, "Pilot Commander on deck!"

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Three dozen activities came to a halt as men and women of all ages and ranks suddenly anchored themselves and threw sharp hands to their foreheads. Her father looked around for several seconds before realizing that Tessa was the only one standing casually. A smile crept into the side of his mouth. "As you were," she said, quietly but directly. The bustle instantly resumed. He looked from her to the dock loaders and back to her, shaking his head with a widening grin. She hugged him, finding that for no reason at all she still only came up to his shoulders in zero-G. As he turned away toward the shuttle hatch, he threw her a quick look of high eyebrows, mouthed, "Wow," and fumbled his way into the port. She stayed to watch until the shuttle gracefully broke orbit.

Something was wrong.

She looked down at the propulsion terminals as they finished their inventory. Everything on Betty was functioning normally. But something had . . .

Loránd had stopped talking.

"Lor?" she whispered. Her tongue moved to form his name again, but she couldn't say it. She tightened her jaw and whispered, "Ceevee, give me internal cam." The cabin sprang to view. Rotated as her eyes moved. Loránd was sitting, arms floating before him. Behind his faceplate, his eyes were closed. Mouth half open. Red lights blinked inside his helmet.

"Ceevee," she whispered again, "shut down my holodisplay. Shut down all heating to Commander Delago's suit."

She was alone.

She paid out the tethers and walked around the outside of the ring toward the CV. Soft clicks as her soles adhered to Betty's rivets. The creaking of her suit. Breath against her faceplate. When she got to the CV, she stepped gingerly around the floodlights and saw Loránd under the canopy in the rear seat. She ordered the cabin depressurized and pulled coolant hoses out of the CV's engine. She opened a pair of valves on the chest of his suit and jerked when a mist of air sprayed out and crystallized. The crystals were red. She twisted the hoses hard into the valves, tugging his limp body as she did. His arms seem to wave her off. "Ceevee, reroute your port engine coolant to bypass engine completely." She stopped as her voice cracked. "Run the coolant to cooling fins only, can you do that?" Ceevee confirmed, Loránd's suit suddenly swelled, and coolant flooded his helmet, bubbling into his mouth. It would cause complete chemical burns and he'd be blind when resuscitated. She settled his drifting arms into his lap. The coolant pulsed in them.

The canopy closed as she stood again on the ring. She made sure her boots were secure before filling her lungs and screaming inside her helmet until her ears rang.

The stars looked on quietly.

She sniffed and switched Ceevee's microphone back on. "Ceevee, how long until link-up?"

"One hour thirty-two minutes."

"Count down time to link. Standard intervals." She sniffed deeper and

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looked at the starfield ahead. "Ceevee, highlight the singularity." A blue crosshair. Her teeth ground into themselves. "Show me a graphic of our intersection with it." She started walking back up the ring as Ceevee displayed an image on her retina of a curving line that swung hard around a small dot before turning back and colliding with it. Betty wouldn't hit the black hole straight on, but she'd be torn apart by the gravity as they arced around it.

"Ceevee, calculate the necessary force needed to divert Betty into escape orbit around mass without incurring destruction-level tidal force."

"Two-hundred-thousand kilonewtons."

Tessa winced. The ion engines weren't even close. She reached the linkage terminals, noticed the crystallized blood from her nose on her glove and scraped it off.

"Ceevee, from Doppler shift, what's our current speed?"

"Twenty-one thousand kilometers per second."

She looked out ahead.

"What if I swivel Betty around? What if instead of Betty facing the direction of pull, it faced away? What effect would that have on gravity radiating out of Alice on link-up?"

"Space-time curvature would travel through bridge in same measure."

Tessa had expected as much, but she was thinking out loud. How else to stop gravity radiating through the tunnel? Sudden acceleration of Betty during transit. Abrupt and short-lived. Acceleration mimics gravity, so thrusting into the gravity well. . . . Maybe open the bridge only a tenth of a second if she used CV's ejection seats to fire them through at the perfect moment. She had Betty's full batteries, engines, computers, the CV with all its equipment. A powerful thrust could stretch the wormhole itself and minimize the effect. She asked Ceevee. Only about a 13 percent decrease.

"If we use the ion engines at their full thrust, I mean *full* regardless of safety limits, and add to that the CV's engines at full, and design something to use the rest of Betty's stored energy in a single explosive discharge, how much reduction can we get?"

"Sixteen percent reduction in gravitational transduction."

"Come on . . ." she whispered. She looked down to the CV's floods, thought of the precious energy they were wasting. "Ceevee, shut off your floodlights." The lights winked out and the sudden darkness caught her off-guard. Betty, the CV, even her own hands became sudden silhouettes of black as the starfield all around her rushed in. Vertigo was palpable, as if she was being spun. Somewhere behind her one of those tiny stars was home. "Ceevee, turn the floods back on!" she yelled, then amended with, "Just one, at a tenth brightness." A flood flickered and complied. The stars stayed at bay.

Darkside knew something had gone wrong with her launch. If they couldn't reconnect on schedule, maybe they'd keep trying.

"If Darkside tries to open the wormhole and we don't respond, how long before they reset and try again?"

"Approximately thirty minutes."

If she could just push the ring into an escape orbit, she could buy time.

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Then estimate when Darkside would try again and blindly time the link . . . how to change course without a decent engine.

"Ceevee, if I can spin Betty like a gyroscope at, say, twenty revolutions per second, how much resistance to orbital change does that give us, figuring how bent space will be near the singularity?"

The difference was minimal, but it was there. One of her hijacked linking computers agreed, but still nowhere near enough a change for an escape orbit. "Come on, Betty," she whispered to the smooth metal. "You can't die. You can not die." *Think.* She factored in explosive decompression of the CV's cabin; overheating the battery deck until they exploded and channeling the reaction through a single CV booster; she even added the push of her own body heat. The display showed a hypothetical 21 percent reduction.

"One hour to bridge link-up."

She was well aware of the time. One linkage display read solely the digits 0:59:57.

"Ceevee, can you calculate how much mass on Betty is not absolutely necessary for link-up? Don't include cables. Don't include the computers or anything else that can be moved off the ring."

"Calculating. Your hydration level is low. Please drink."

Tessa drank from the nipple in her helmet, feeling the moisture across her body wick away as the suit recycled.

"Four thousand, eighty-one kilograms."

"And the length of all of Betty's cables, end to end?"

"Seven hundred meters."

Slingshot. Split Betty's mass in two. Half just Betty and half everything else, tethered together by seven hundred meters of cable. An explosive backward burst on the far end would swing Betty into a slightly different course. She saw she could detonate and channel enough force to make it work, if the cables—

The terminal showed a simple figure. The cables would snap.

She doubled them back on themselves. It would be strong enough, but too short; the necessary backward blast was more than she could create. She slammed a palm onto Betty's skin.

"Forty-five minutes to bridge linkup."

"Come on," she whispered. Ahead of her, the gray sky sat cold and motionless. The blue crosshair blinked gently and fixed.

"Ceevee, since Betty essentially anchors a great space-time wrinkle, is there any way she can be used to anchor the bent space-time around a black hole?"

MOVING?

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Ceevee didn't know. She knew it wouldn't. She furiously typed as fast as her gloves would allow, trying to discern if Alice could exert a drag on Betty during linkup—the drag they always fought to minimize—without fully opening the bridge. She tried a shorter version of the pendulum idea, with multiple bursts and higher revolutions building over several minutes.

"Thirty minutes to bridge linkup."

"I know what time it is!" she yelled.

She had two screens of Betty's schematics flitting by in front of her. Looking for anything that could bend space for a few seconds. Alice was the space-bender. Betty just anchored the bridge. She went back to the revolving pendulum idea. If she could eke out some kind of thrust from Betty, or some kind of repulsion, or something more to push Betty slightly, she could make up the difference. She couldn't even help but figure Loránd's kilograms in the back of her head and found some comfort that it wouldn't come close to helping.

Ceevee's announcement of fifteen minutes caught her off-guard. She raised her head from the terminals and tried to take deep breaths. She stared at the soft blue crosshair, trying to calm herself. The steady blue seemed to shimmer, to move.

"Ceevee," she said, quietly, "remove the singularity crosshairs."

The cross disappeared. For a long moment, nothing happened, then a star seemed to waver, elongate and fade. Another, right beside, shimmered, flickered. The singularity. Gravitational lensing. Horrifically beautiful. She reached out a hand.

"Presto-mesto."

As she watched, the flickering star slowly stretched into a tiny curve, wrapped into a halo, and faded back as a curve and a point again.

Her breath suddenly misted her faceplate.

"Ceevee! I need to get out of here! I need eight thousand more kilojoules of power from somewhere! Give me *something!*"

"Please restate query."

Swing the pendulum, perhaps as the bridge begins to open, then shut down connection manually when it exerts drag but before it makes full connection. Detonate everything at opposite tether at the same moment. Throw Betty into—she checked the readout: 0:11:13—a wider arc around the black hole. If it doesn't manage full escape orbit, it might prolong the orbit and instead of transiting back when Darkside attempts a second connection—

"Ten minutes to bridge linkup."

—use the second transit to again produce drag. How to time so many connections? Send a message back somehow during first attempted transit. Coded in the anchoring itself. Decline the anchor in a series—0:07:24—in a series of clicks. It could work, or at least give time to retry as the first orbit decays. She looked up and no longer needed the crosshairs. A series of stars changed color and wavered before their image was stretched. Like flawed glass. Her suit was slick with sweat. She abandoned the pendulum idea. No time to string it together. Working on explosive burst of the CV and batteries. Maybe missed something.

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"Five minutes to bridge linkup."

Come on! She could feel it, like an eye, the only motion out there. Open fields and fresh cut grass. Soft summer breezes and grass-stained hands. *Think!*

"Ceevee—Ceevee, prepare to disengage linkage on my command."

"Linkage disconnect requires commander confirmation."

She pulled pliers from her belt and bent open the terminal housing. *Think.* Burning the lithium skin and channeling it—

"Sixty seconds to bridge reconnection. Please prepare—"

"Shut up!"

The terminal displays began switching to linkage status. Lights winked on and some of the cables moved slightly as the ring primed itself for the oncoming strain. She tore open the back of the main terminal.

"Thirty seconds to bridge reconnection."

The pliers were tossed as the wire cutters plunged into the terminal. *Think! Think of something!* She wrapped its teeth around two power lines.

"Twenty seconds to—"

Induce multiple drags by—reroute—think! Maybe it won't radiate through! Maybe it—spin end over—

Ten.

She was crouched over, helmet resting against the terminal. Feeling the vibrations as Betty readied herself. *Grass-stained fingers.*

She squeezed, and felt the wires give.

"Betty reporting failed link. Retrying," came Ceevee's calm voice.

"Failure. Retrying . . ."

"Failure. Retrying . . ."

She didn't move until she heard: "Link full failure. Betty shutting down." She opened her eyes and watched the wire cutters drift gently out of her hand.

She stood slowly, making sure her boots had a good magnetic lock, facing back toward Betty's stern. The same gray sky greeted her in every direction. Some thickness towards the Milky Way, but otherwise the unbroken mist of stars.

"Ceevee, show me Sol. Show me Ohio."

A crosshair fluttered to life around an otherwise nondescript yellow star.

"Aim your communications array toward Sol."

Ceevee confirmed. She stared at the tiny star. At two and a half light years away, she was seeing old light. She thought about where she was, what she was doing two and a half years ago when she was first in that light. Ceevee confirmed the array was aligned. She wanted nothing so much as to be able to wipe at her eyes.

"This is Commander Tessa Bruncsak of CV One, Mission 973. Commander Loránd Delago has died as a result of injuries sustained outtransit. By now you are already aware that the wormhole was not able to link due to a failure of Betty. We discovered that a singularity existed near Betty's flight course. When we arrived, we discovered that we would

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be too near the singularity to allow Betty to open again. I disconnected Betty's linkage. I was unsuccessful in changing Betty's course.

"Commander Delago performed admirably despite significant injuries. His last words were of his wife, Marith." She paused. Clenched her teeth twice.

"I anticipate intersecting the singularity in approximately ten minutes. I would like to thank all the governments who made this program possible. And I'd like to thank my mother and father for their support of my role in it." She started clenching her teeth again.

"Ceevee, send that."

When she turned around, the singularity was clearly visible. A simple, black disk of emptiness, surrounded by the twisting, fluttering images of contorting starlight. Her breath caught in her throat and she breathed heavily to fight it.

"Ceevee, time to tidal threshold?" She was surprised how she almost yelled.

"Three minutes, eighteen seconds."

Her flimsy flesh wouldn't last even that long. The blackness grew visibly larger, looming, twisting light as she plummeted toward it. She locked her knees and squared her shoulders as the drain of the sea opened before her. Her eyes grew wide.

"Okay," she whispered. "Hold my hand, Dad."

He was working in the garden when the call came. Tessa's transmission.

In the long two and a half years since the bridge failure, experts from around the world had parsed the data until they'd pieced it together. They'd hoped the crew managed a radio transmission. It came the day they'd expected.

He listened to it with Tessa's mother, sitting in their living room, the two gentlemen from the space agency playing the recording. They wanted them to hear it before it was released to the world in the morning. The collapsed star would be officially named Bruncsak-Delago. They said kind words and left politely. He went back to work in the garden.

Long after he went to bed and watched the moon ease itself down the panes of his window, the fields were still quiet. ❍

ALIEN INVASION

These words are now inside your head.

—Peter Payack

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CHANGE OF LIFE

Kat Meltzer

Kat Meltzer has no kids and no pets, not even cats. "The care and feeding of a husband and a garden are about all I'm qualified to handle. I've been a mime, a stage tech, and a health care educator. Good practice, I suppose, for my writing career." Kat has published a few stories and essays, but her first tale for *Asimov's* comes after a five year dry spell. She's working on a novel about faith v. materialism.

Everybody wants to be paid: doctors, hospitals, the landlord who wishes Glinda would hurry up and get senile so that her rent-controlled apartment could be vacated. So Glinda perches on her new donut cushion, and types.

Save and print. Esther Smyley, DOB 8/14/1922, is getting a Final Reminder. Miss Smyley rated a single ho-hum inch in the paper when her purse was snatched last year. If she had died, she would have gotten better coverage and some plastic bouquets to mark the spot. Instead, if she does not remit $22,980 for her ER VISIT; X-RAYS; CAST, FIBERGLASS; and LAB WORK, Glinda will be forced to notify the Credit Bureau.

At least she will never have to make the phone calls. At an overripe fifty-seven, she has been at Bay Medical Collections longer than anyone, even her supervisor Mr. Shepherd. Mr. Shepherd says Glinda's voice is dulcet. He says the deadbeats (S-Z) don't know what they're missing, but if she can fill her quota without calls, then Stuart (A-I) and Cece (J-R) should chill.

The WKED News Chicken squawks for headlines at the half-hour. Glinda leans closer to her clock radio.

More tiger attacks, one in Brooklyn, two in Miami—

"Hello-ooo!" singsongs Stuart. "Some of us are working!"

And I am the Queen of Romania, thinks Glinda as she lowers the volume.

"Of course I love you," Stuart murmurs into his headset. "She just needs someone to talk to, you know?"

—and the Director of Homeland Security counsels the nation not to panic.

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Glinda fidgets in her ergonomically stupid chair, made more so by the cushion, a gift from Mr. Shepherd. Cece said it was sexual harassment that he didn't give her one too.

Miss Smyley's Final Notice is eight pages long. Why on earth did she let the doctor wrap her L ARM in a fiberglass cast? Medicare would have covered plaster, but because she got fiberglass, they're denying the whole visit, period.

Poor old thing. Poor all the old things, all the Esther Smyleys who have the bad judgment to get sick without winning the Lotto. Glinda reminds herself to be thankful for her health. Such as it is.

Ka-thunk. Cece's stapler technique is the pounding method favored by five-year-olds. Cece is twenty-two, a pierced fireplug of a girl, with Chinese characters tattooed on her calves. She goes through staplers like diet candies. Glinda aligns the pages of Miss Smyley's notice. Her own stapler is missing.

Ka-thunk.

Miss Smyley will have to make do with a paperclip. Glinda draws a little heart by her signature so that the woman will know that she, Glinda, is a caring human being, not a fish-lipped cad or a floozy with a pierced tongue.

Gettin' you ready for WKED's Wicked Weekend, he's more donut than man! Donut Man!

Jojo the mailboy hunches over her Out Tray. "Ma'am? How's it going, ma'am?"

"Just peachy, Joseph. And you?"

She hopes a formal name will somehow bestow a soupçon of dignity. Alas, he really does look like a Jojo—smallish and stooped, with watery eyes and a spindly mustache. Once Cece accidentally stapled his thumb and Jojo bled on the mail. Stuart said bloody envelopes would send a message to the deadbeats. But Glinda took Jojo to the break room and dressed the punctures with peroxide and a Band-Aid.

"Can I talk to you, ma'am?" He empties the tray, one envelope at a time. "It's kinda important."

Glinda hands him the envelope containing Miss Smyley's Final Notice. "Actually, Joseph—"

Up next, hots and hotties, Donut Man's FRIDAY WTF!

"Turn it up!" yells Stuart.

Work halts as everyone listens to the now infamous Larry King interview with Christian Defense spokesman Reed Randall.

—missing since our anniversary. I simply asked Marion if she'd like that laser thing because she was getting a little mustache.

A great gift, sir. Truly great.

I even said she could have liposuction. Whereupon Satan possessed her.

Clearly Mrs. Randall needed psychological help. But last night on this very show Satan denied any involvement with your wife's disappearance. How do you respond, sir?

She tore up the couch. She defecated on my pillow. In my shoes! But I didn't kill her!

"I would have," snorts Stuart.

"He should have. When I'm fifty, I'm going to kill myself!" says Cece.

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Ka-thunk ka-thunk.

Time to go. Glinda turns off the radio and her computer. She shoulders her purse, a sleek leather bag that contains a small hairbrush, sunglasses, lotion, her cell phone, and her tidy billfold. Then she steps daintily past Jojo and the stacks of manila folders that surround her desk.

Mr. Shepherd's door is open. Glinda tugs her over-sized black turtleneck sweater further toward her knees and knocks. The body-bag look does not flatter the mature woman. Cece snickers.

"Glinda!" Mr. Shepherd smoothes his hairplugs. "Glinda Glinda Glinda!"

"I'm off to my doctor's appointment, sir."

"But you went last week!" He bounds to her side and smothers her hands in both of his. "You're all right, aren't you? Nothing's wrong?"

His nosy pink nose is immense. She would like to swat it. But then he would have to fire her, after which he would vow to console her. She forces a smile.

"Just some female trouble, sir."

"Well. Right then. Okey-dokey." Nothing backs up the male of the species faster than a hint of vaginas and gore. "You'll be in Monday?"

"Oh yes." Glinda extricates herself from his grip. As she exits to the street, Cece says loudly:

"OMG, she's getting fat. Can you believe her ass?"

Glinda tugs her sweater again and hails a cab. She feels like an elegant hairball.

Glinda, it seems, is growing a tail.

The Sutter-Hyde Professional Building is faux-marble outside, and slick chrome and mauve inside. An earthquake might sink Bay Medical into liquefied landfill, but this building is situated on bedrock. She scratches her neck as the elevator rises to the tenth floor. Everything is going to be fine.

Dr. Opoku's receptionist says that at the millennium, the planet began vibrating at a higher frequency. Tails and so forth are a beautiful and natural part of the new aging process. She accepts Glinda's co-pay with a bouncy Buddha bow. "And how are we this week?"

Glinda can feel the other women in the waiting area adjust their radar. They want to know if she is better or worse than they are, if she has heard about a cure, or for that matter, a cause.

"Oh, about the same."

The girl hands her a disposable paper gown and points her down the hall. "Room two. She's running behind. Again."

Dr. Opoku is growing a tail as well. There is a silent epidemic of tail-growing. Everywhere women of a certain age are seeing female physicians, female x-ray technicians, and female therapists of similar mileage with whom to discuss their life changes. Males are not in this loop.

Glinda strips, and scratches her backside. Yesterday's paper is in the magazine rack. CHER GOES INTO SECLUSION. RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONDEMN THE DRAMATIC INCREASE IN DIVORCE ACTIONS. IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES DECRIED AS FEMINIST PLOT, says the headline. They have no idea, thinks Glinda.

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She discards the paper gown, and curls up on the exam table. Its leather pad is warm and soft. Her naked pink tail flicks the back of her thighs and she dozes.

"Wakey wakey." Dr. Opoku enters without knocking. She is long-limbed and dark. Glinda covets her slim figure, but genes are genes, and Glinda's mother began to widen in her forties. Her own slinky days are over.

Dr. Opoku snaps on her surgical gloves. "I had four walk-ins this morning and my back is killing me."

Glinda and her tail are poked, prodded, and gently pulled. Dr. Opoku's touch is hypnotically pleasurable.

"Just over fourteen inches." Dr. Opoku drops the tape measure in her lab coat pocket. "Very nice. Every woman wants fourteen inches."

"Ha ha." Dr. Opoku made the same joke last week at ten inches, and the week before that at eight. "How long is yours now?"

"Twenty-one and three-quarters." She presses the long muscles along Glinda's spine. "Mm-hm. Roll over please. Any discomfort?"

"Everything itches back there."

"That's the fur coming in." Dr. Opoku pats Glinda's hip. "Come on, come on. Over you go."

Fur? Glinda stares at the ceiling while Dr. Opoku chats.

"You've already got a nice posterior fuzz going. The facial fur will start in a day or two. Okay, all done." Dr. Opoku removes her gloves. She pulls her stool beneath her and spins over to the counter and begins scribbling in Glinda's chart. "Any questions?"

"Fur!?"

"The pharmacy downstairs has something called Epi-crème. It's over the counter but don't get carried away. Face and hands only. It burns like crazy. Trust me."

A sound rises in Glinda's throat, almost a snarl. Dr. Opoku taps her pen to her lip. "I take it I didn't tell you about the fur?"

Glinda suppresses an alien urge to violence, involving somehow . . . her teeth? "I would have remembered."

Dr. Opoku's tail slides below the hem of her lab coat, a sleek undulation of gleaming black fur that hangs almost to the floor. It lifts away from the stool's wheels and she pushes off from the counter and rolls to Glinda.

"All I know is what I see from my other patients. Which is after you hit twelve inches or so, things happen pretty fast."

Glinda's skin prickles. "What things?"

Dr. Opoku raises her right hand. She flexes the palm and claws unfurl from her fingertips.

Glinda's apartment is tidy and spare. An asparagus fern. A small television, a few CDs—Sinatra, some Miss Peggy Lee, and everything by the Ramones. Joey Ramone's caterwauling drove her wild. But he is gone and now, if she has a vice, it is pillows. She will never be rich or famous, but at least she can lounge without having to hold up her own weight.

She orders sushi from the Japanese restaurant on the corner. When she hears the delivery boy's scooter, she can't get to the door fast enough. Her

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order is double-bagged and still the fishy fog is so thick and rude it reaches under her clothes and tickles her nipples, even the tiny new ones.

"Excuse me? This is fresh, isn't it?"

But the boy revs his scooter and speeds off.

Glinda dabs saliva from the corners of her mouth. Either the fish is old or someone's created a sumo-salmon. The specter of food poisoning and an ER visit win. Ah well, she's got ice cream upstairs. She tosses the sushi in the dumpster.

Her tail aches. She spends an itchy night, up and down, up and down. The apartment smells of Epi-crème, the sheets wind around her legs, she is hot, she is so hot. Maybe she should call in sick Monday. But she isn't sick. She is merely a woman on the verge of fur. And possibly claws. She flexes her fingers. Nothing. Around four, the dumpster lid bangs and something or things have a grand old time in the garbage.

Saturday morning: her tail has grown another inch. The Epi-crème has turned her face to boiled meat. She is missing most of one eyebrow. The rest of her body is covered with silky golden fuzz. So she is to be a blonde. That's something, at least.

The day's breaking news is a press conference by the Director of Homeland Security.

—a leopard shot after attacking the Vice President at his home in Virginia . . . attacks coordinated by sleeper cells in our universities . . . anyone with information regarding the whereabouts of David Attenborough—

Glinda unplugs the TV. Perhaps a stroll in the most beautiful city in the world? Even Union Square is lacking any women of a vintage similar to Glinda's. There are only baffled old men, tourist families, and youthful immortals whose tattoos will never sag. Then there is that corporate water feature, a black marble waterfall in the center of a koi pond . . .

She decides she is more in the mood for a stay-at-home weekend. She excavates her fat clothes from the back of her closet and stacks up her Ramones CDs. Tail or not, she still has bills to pay. Bay Medical does not have a dress code, but Glinda does. She passes the hours napping amid her pillows, and altering her skirts, while listening as Joey wails on *Subterranean Jungle*.

Mr. Shepherd is alarmed by her asymmetrical brows. He escorts her to her desk, asking if there's anything he can do, yap yap yap. His hair restorer is a bile-colored halo. She's gagging, but he simply won't leave. There's nothing for it. She presses his re-sodded head to her bosom.

"Thank you for your concern, sir."

It's the most glorious hug of Mr. Shepherd's life. She rubs his head on her breasts until the stench fades into her own clothes.

He stammers that she is a valued member of the team and that his utmost respect will be reflected in her next performance review.

Glinda excuses herself to the ladies' room. She scrubs her clothes with damp paper towels until she can breathe.

"Suck-up," mutters Stuart, when she emerges.

"Slut," coughs Cece.

Glinda's tail is stuffed inside her Kevlar-strength support hose, and she

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is dying for a good scratch. She has half a mind to urinate on their chairs, and professionalism be damned. But her hose and wet clothes would ruin the gesture: she would simply pee on her tail and feet. So instead she turns off the radio.

"Heyyyy!" Stuart and Cece protest in vain. WKED Marty Ray's Morning Bonanza is forever lost.

She still types, although she is slowed considerably by a desire to nap. Occasionally she flexes her fingers and thinks longingly of her forsaken sushi. On her break she calls Dr. Opoku to complain about the Epi-crème. The phone rings and rings. How dare these doctors demand to be paid when they won't help people?

At noon, Jojo parks his cart at her desk. "You feeling better, ma'am?" he whispers.

His breath smells of gizzards, fish heads and mashed grain. Glinda's brain is horrified, but her tail squirms in her pantyhose.

"Are you wearing aftershave, Jojo?" She swallows to keep from drooling. She wants to taste his lips, his teeth, his tonsils—

"That's my breakfast, ma'am. From Wong's House of Fried Things." He glances at Stuart and Cece who, for once, appear to be working. "Ma'am, I gotta talk to you."

She cups his face and kisses him. Then she licks the molecules of fried flavor from her palms.

"Jojo!" Mr. Shepherd stares in flushed disbelief. He snatches Cece's stapler and shoots staples at the boy. "You're fired!"

Jojo grabs Glinda, who grabs her purse. Mr. Shepherd's howl of betrayal rises above the traffic.

"Glindaaaaa!"

Two blocks later Jojo is wheezing. Glinda buys him a Coke. It is one of those rare days where the sun goes naked. The Park-N-Pay lot is unattended. Glinda stretches out on the hood of an ancient Impala while Jojo catches his breath.

"You gotta get out, ma'am."

"That's very sweet, Joseph. But Mr. Shepherd is harmless. I'll see you don't get fired."

"No! I mean OUT out!"

Jojo smells like Coke, which renders him inedible and therefore uninteresting. The pigeons strutting by the tires, on the other hand—

"Like my mom! Before they get you!"

A pigeon waddles within range. Its plump breast taunts her. Slowly, Glinda rolls over to a crouch. Then an elderly woman creeps from beneath an SUV. She has stringy white hair and an old cast on her left arm. Her yellow-eyed glare dares Glinda to challenge her claim to the bird.

"Let it go, ma'am. You gotta listen to me while you still can!"

Glinda bares her teeth. The woman hisses. *Mine!* Her claws are fully extended. Glinda flexes her hands and at last exposes her own claws, too late. The woman springs, snaps the pigeon's spine with her teeth and stuffs it into a Pier 39 shopping bag. Then she hauls herself to her hind legs and totters off.

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Glinda gives a ragged yowl. She leaps, she will hunt down that bitch and take what is hers! To her surprise, Jojo wrestles her to the ground and clamps a hand over her mouth.

"Don't yell, ma'am!" He scratches the tender flesh behind her ear. She is flooded with orgasmic relief for an itch she didn't know she had. She holds his hand with her claws.

"Ma'am? You're hurting me, ma'am."

"Hm? Oh. Sorry." She pushes her head into his monkey palm as an apology.

"My dad and me, we snuck my mom to the mountains. They're making zoos, ma'am." Jojo rubs the tiny punctures on his arm. "Old lady zoos. Not that you're old, but—"

Glinda laughs. Instantly Jojo smells of something other than Coke, something dull and brackish. Glinda wants to stop laughing, but she can't. She has fur. She has claws. She is stronger than she has ever been. This "they" of Jojo's—she has an impression of albino gorillas wearing ties—don't they have large beating arteries in their throats? She salivates, and laughs even harder.

Jojo shoves her away, and climbs to his feet. "Forget you, ma'am."

Shame, that's the smell. Jojo is engulfed in a gray cloud of shame. "Now Joseph," Glinda purrs, "you don't believe that. You're a smart boy, aren't you? Sure you are."

Jojo throws back his shoulders until his usually concave chest is painfully arched. "No, ma'am. I'm not smart. But I don't lie. And that leopard in Virginia was my Aunt Enid."

Glinda naps on the Impala hood till the parking lot cools in the late afternoon shade. She lifts her nose and tastes the air. Dusty feathers, blood, the pungent triumph of the pigeon thief, and the monkey boy's sour shame. Didn't she make him a promise? Yes. She opens her cell phone and taps in the number with one claw.

"Bay Medical Collections. May I help you?" Cece's tongue stud clicks against her teeth.

"Shepherd, prrease." Glinda strains to form the words.

"Gee, I wish I could take as long of lunches as you. What are you, drunk? Hey Stuart, guess who's hammered?" Cece listens to his reply and snorts. "For sure. He says you'd have to be to bang that little freak."

"Jojooooah?"

"Hey, lover boy is totally fired. But some kinko dudes with nets are here. They came in all 'let's see your I.D.' and I'm all WTF? I am so not her. Now they're in with Mr. Shepherd."

Ka-thunk ka-thunk.

"Aw gross. Too much info. Stuart says aren't you a little old to be a playa?"

The cell phone tumbles from Glinda's grasp. It skitters across the asphalt like a silvery beetle. She pounces. The beetle chitters as she bats it between her paws.

"Stuart says you better get your ass back here, cause no way we're doing your work."

Glinda gnaws the beetle's antenna. She feels a hand on her shoulder.

"Pardon me, miss, but you dropped your purse."

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The gorilla's pink face is kind. He reaches for her beetle. "Here, let me help you up."

Mine! Glinda sinks her teeth into his wrist until she feels the snap of bone. The gorilla screams and kicks her nose. She slashes his throat with one blow. He falls stiffly, and is still. Her senses thrill to the taste of fresh meat.

She lopes from the parking lot. Other creatures begin to shriek. They scatter, leaving acrid cloud-trails of fear. Her joy is electric. These monkeys don't know even the most basic tricks of a herd. She wants to chase them all.

A gunshot startles her. There, in the alley across the street, is a debris box, and above it, a fire escape. She springs atop a honking metal creature. The apes in its belly scream and she licks her lips. A second shot rings out. She launches herself, she bounds from car roof to car roof, till she is across the asphalt river. She paws off the remains of her clothes. Movement is instantly easier with her tail free. She leaps atop the box, leaps again and swings by her claws from the lowest rung of the fire escape ladder. She curls her hind legs and tail upward, reaches and scrabbles for purchase. In another second, her movements are easy and controlled, and she is on the gravel roof.

She pads to the edge of the roof. She can still taste the dusty auras of the roaring metal creatures, but there are other flavors: a blue oxygen haze from the forest in Golden Gate Park, briny wisps of fog, and a rich feline graffiti. Names. Scent marks.

She is not alone.

On every roof in sight, on hers as well, her lion sisters and her cousins the leopards, the tigers and cheetahs, cougars and panthers. stir as they rise from their afternoon naps.

She approaches her companions, another lioness and a panther. They sniff each other cautiously, then rub heads to share their scents. The greeting is satisfactory. Their purrs rumble like neighborly thunder. When the sun sinks into the fog, they descend. Now it is time to hunt. ○

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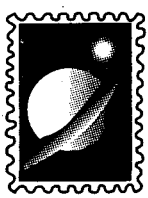

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ARE YOU THERE

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead tells us, "In recent years, internet 'chatting' has emerged as an entirely new form of communication, one that seems to invite intimacy while at the same time encouraging isolation. This situation, extrapolated forward, was the genesis for the current story." He invites readers to visit his web site at *www. jackskillingstead.com.*

Deatry took the door because he wanted to see the look on the Bastard's face. That put his partner Raymond Farkas in the alley, where Deatry assumed he was wet and not too happy. The hallway smelled like mildew and Chinese food. There were two light fixtures between 307 and the stairs. The one closer to Deatry was burned out. Muffled television voices spoke from the other rooms but 307 was quiet.

Deatry stood in the hall a long time, too long, his stunner drawn but pointed at the floor, finger outside the trigger guard. He had the passkey, but he couldn't move. A memory of plate glass coughing into the atrium. Suburban sunshine, string music, and shredded shoppers. Blood on the terrazzo. White dowel of bone poking through mangled flesh and skin flap.

The hand he used to hold.

Deatry was sweating. The man in 307 shredded his victims one at a time, with some art, but no political considerations, at least none that Deatry was aware of. Why the paralyzing memory association?

Deatry started at the unmistakable *buzzpop* of a stunner burst. It had sounded from beyond the room on the other side of the door.

He fumbled the passkey, dropped it, used his foot. Wood splintering crash, jamb split, the door banged into the wall, and Deatry went through, sweeping the empty room with his weapon.

Curtains billowed. The burst had come from the alley. Deatry clambered onto the fire escape. November rain blew over him, chill on the back of his neck. There were no lights in the alley, unless you counted the checkerboard windows of the other buildings.

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Deatry clanged down the zigzag stairs, iron rail cold on his hand, and dropped to the buckled concrete. The garbage smell was wet and ripe, bags of it piled around the dumpster. One of the bags groaned and stood up, a man. Deatry pointed his stunner.

"It's me," the man said, raising an open hand. "Ray."

"Jesus Christ," Deatry said. "Did you hit him?"

"Yeah, but he must have been wearing one of those repelling vests."

"Did you see his face?"

"Nope."

"Well—"

"Don't worry, it's not a total loss. I got to feel his knife. It's real sharp."

Farkas's shirt was wet, but in the bad light who knew it was blood?

Then Raymond Farkas extended his hand, which was holding a flat module made of black metal. Deatry holstered his weapon and took it. Farkas swayed, and Deatry gripped his shoulder with his free hand.

"He dropped that," Farkas said, and collapsed forward. Deatry dropped the module himself when he tried to catch his partner.

Dawn had begun to pale the sky by the time Deatry returned home and climbed the newly installed set of exterior stairs to the second floor. Inside, he stood at the window with a bottle of beer for a few minutes, not thinking. It was as quiet as it ever got in the grid. Deatry knew his ex-wife, who occupied the lower half of the narrow two story "slot" house, would be waking up soon. Sometimes, when she noticed his light on or heard him shuffling around after being awake all night, she came up to the bolted door that separated the two halves of the house, wanting to talk. Deatry hated that. He referred to Barbara as his ex-wife, but the truth was they had never legally divorced. A divorce would automatically have evoked the Space and Occupancy Act and forced them to vacate the relative spaciousness of the home they had legally shared as man and wife. And the other truth was (at least the truth Deatry allowed), they both loved the house more than they had ever loved each other. The Space and Occupancy Act was only one of many laws designed to encourage the sacred tradition of marriage. The SAOA hadn't existed at the time of Deatry's previous marriage. So that particular example of sacredness had been allowed to go to hell in its own traditional manner.

Deatry turned off the lamp, unrolled his Apple VI Scroll, and powered it up. White Echo was waiting for him.

"Hi," he typed.

"I was almost asleep." Her words appeared rapidly, a quick and flawless keypadder.

"That's okay. I know it's late. I just wanted to say hi."

"And you said it. But don't go. I—miss you all day."

"I miss you, too," Deatry typed, and he meant it. But he was also glad White Echo, a.k.a. Kimberly, was not an entity who could climb a flight of stairs and knock on his door.

"Are you all right?" Kimberly asked.

"Peachy. It's Farkas. We followed a tip tonight and he got cut, and it was at least partly my fault."

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"How was it your fault?"

Deatry briefly described the situation at the co-op apartment building.

"I don't see how it was your fault," Kimberly said.

"I had the door. And I waited too long. Jackie Boy must have sensed something was up. Anyway, forget it. How was your day?"

"Delightful and lonely."

"That's life in the big city. The lonely part, anyway. Delight is a little harder to come by. You have a knack for it."

After a long pause, during which Deatry began to think she had been disconnected, Kimberly typed: "It doesn't HAVE to be lonely."

Deatry's fingers hovered over the keypad like hummingbirds assessing the possibility of nectar. He didn't want to get into it again.

"Brian?"

He gave it another few beats, then typed: "Damn it, I'm sorry. Barbara's at the door."

"Play dead."

"Ha! I can't do that. She knows I'm in here. She was already awake when I got home. The lights were on. She must have heard me come in."

Lord of the Lies. They floated him above a nasty splinter of his personality.

"Okay," Kimberly typed.

"I'm really sorry."

"Yes." Then: "It's okay. I have to sleep anyway. Alone as always."

Usually he could redirect her mood, but he was bone tired this morning. So even though he knew it was lame, Deatry replied, "I'm REALLY sorry." And: "Gotta go now." And: "G'nite."

He sighed and turned off the Scroll and let it roll back into a tube. Then God played a mean trick on him. There was a tentative knock on the interior door, followed by a slightly more aggressive knock, and Barbara's voice:

"Brian? I've got coffee."

Deatry turned in his chair and stared wearily at the door. He waited, imagining her on the other side. She didn't knock again, and after a while her footsteps retreated down the stairs.

Deatry and Raymond Farkas were parapolice detectives working a dumpy quarter-grid of the Seattle-Tacoma sprawl. The local inhabitants paid their salaries. They didn't *have* to pay, of course. It was a free country. And the paradetectives were free to ignore the non-paying enclaves, though Deatry had never done that and wouldn't. The real murder police worked the tonier grids and had the terror watch, which sucked resources like a starving baby.

Deatry slipped down to the crime lab of the real police department, where he had a few friends from the old days. He showed the module to a man who looked like a cross between a boiled egg and a vulture in a white lab coat.

"It's a Loved One," the man, whose name was Stuhring, said.

An old memory stirred briefly in the refuse at the back of Deatry's mind.

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"Those dead person things?"

"Right. Guy's dying but still coherent enough, got all his marbles rattling around, or it's a living will thing. They hook him up and make one of these gizmos from his engramatic template. Fries his brain, but he's not going to live anyway. End of the day, dear old Uncle Ned can still talk to you, respond just like the original, all that. Parlor trick. There was a vogue, then the creep factor killed it."

"Will this one work?"

Stuhring rummaged around in a junk box, tried a couple of adapters, found one that fit, and plugged the module into a computer.

After a moment, *Hello?* appeared on the screen.

"It works," Stuhring said.

"No voice?"

He shrugged. "You'd have to noodle around with it. Take the adapter. You can plug it into your Scroll, if you want."

Hello? appeared under the first Hello.

"Why's it keep saying that?" Deatry asked. "Is it broken?"

"How do I know? Ask it."

Deatry typed: "Are you broken?"

They waited, but no more words appeared.

"There's your answer," Stuhring said.

"Maybe."

Deatry had a weird feeling. He unplugged the Loved One and pocketed the adapter.

Deatry met Raymond Farkas at a bar on Second Avenue called The Scarlet Tree, though its patrons referred to it affectionately as The Bloody Stump.

Farkas eased into a chair, holding his right hand lightly over his ribs where the blade had gone in, scoring bone. He was older than Deatry, about thirty pounds overweight, and had a walrus mustache which was going gray.

"Hurt?" Deatry asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think it probably hurts."

"You're probably right," Farkas said. "The doc said it was a razor or the Bastard's usual scalpel. Guess he'd know."

It was the middle of the day and they were drinking pints of amber ale. It didn't matter, since they were private employees. It was kind of a perk. Deatry drank deep, then put his glass down and said: "I'm sorry, Ray."

"What about?" There was foam in his mustache.

"Sorry I forgot your birthday, what else? Jesus Christ. I'm sorry I almost got you killed."

Farkas shrugged. "I had the alley. You flushed him, then it was on me. I blew it."

"I didn't exactly flush him."

Farkas shrugged again. "What else you want to talk about?"

"That module thing he dropped. It was a Loved One. You know what that is?"

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"No shit? Yeah, I know what they are."

Farkas had already finished his amber. He waved at the bartender and she brought over another one. Deatry still had a ways to go on his first.

"Pair a beers for the paradicks," the bartender said, in a friendly way. She was fortyish, attractive in a twice-around-the-block kind of way. Deatry had once seen the inside of her bedroom and other things.

Farkas grabbed up his fresh pint and drained it by a third.

"You get anything off the Loved One?"

"No."

"Could be a good break."

"It won't talk."

"Get a techie to cannibalize it. That way you at least get the basics. If it was a relative of our guy then maybe we have a name."

Deatry drank his ale.

"What's the matter, you don't want to take it apart?"

Deatry shrugged. His shrugs weren't as eloquent as Farkas's and he knew it.

"Why not?" Farkas said.

"Next time," Deatry said, "I'm on the alley."

"Whatever."

They drank a couple more pints and watched the ball game, which was a disaster. When they left The Scarlet Tree Deatry waited while his partner eased into a cab. Farkas was on his first marriage and had a fourteen-year-old daughter. Deatry once attended a Patriots of September party at the Farkas apartment. It had been boozy but not overboard, plenty of kids, loud and friendly, the whole building population joining in, spilling out into the street. Farkas had a *life*. Deatry wanted to keep it that way.

Two AM. Deatry was staring at the chatwindow center screen of his Scroll.

"I miss you," White Echo, a.k.a. Kimberly, said. "But I don't want to keep you here on this dumb THING. I need a real flesh and blood man. Brian? Can you understand?"

Deatry finished another bottle of beer and set the dead soldier on the floor next to the rest of the empty platoon.

After a while he typed: "I understand."

"We've been talking for months," Kimberly said.

"Yes."

"We don't even use the chat enhancements."

"I thought you liked the writing part."

"I do. It's old fashioned and sweet."

"But?" Deatry typed

"But I want to meet you."

Deatry didn't type anything. Then, being funny, he typed: "I'm married."

"No kidding? Oh my gawd!!"

Deatry smiled, but Kimberly wasn't going to be diverted.

"Listen to me," she typed.

"I'm listening." He twisted the cap off another beer.

"We're the walking wounded. We've talked all about that. What hap-

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pened with my first husband. Your mother and the bomb. The way your father checked out. The way things have gone with your relationships. All that stuff."

Deatry shifted on his chair, drank, held the cold bottle in his lap.

"But we're cowards if we don't try to love again."

Deatry put the bottle down and typed: "I do love you."

"Love behind a firewall isn't real," Kimberly typed.

"It's real."

"Brian. I want to take the next step now. I want to meet you. I want to go for a walk with you. I want to feel your hand in my hand. I want to kiss you. For real. Not just in my head. I want to have a relationship with you. I HAVE to try again."

"I know."

"It's scary."

"True," Deatry typed.

"But in a way this is scarier."

Deatry drank his beer.

"This is . . . too remote," Kimberly typed. "It's okay at first, then it's kind of sick. I think."

Deatry drank his beer.

"So what I'm saying is let's meet. Like for a cup of coffee. It's a simple first step. It doesn't have to be perfect. I think you're afraid it won't be perfect, or that your heart will get broken. Hearts DO get broken. But you still have to take a risk. There's no life without the risk."

Deatry put his bottle down, almost typed something, then didn't.

"So," Kimberly typed. "Next Monday at ten AM I'm going to be at the Still Life Café. You know where that is? I'll be there."

Deatry typed: "Will you be wearing a red carnation in your lapel?"

"Sure."

A long beat. Then, "Brian? If you're not there, I don't think I can come back online with you. I mean I won't. I love you, but this keeps me from what I need. A relationship. In real life. I don't want to hurt you, but I have to protect my heart, too."

"It's okay."

"You're not going to be there, are you."

Deatry stared at the screen.

"Goodbye," Kimberly typed.

The Loved One wouldn't talk. Every night Deatry jacked it into his Apple Scroll and peppered it with conversational gambits, to no avail. But he had a feeling. In the police lab, when the Loved One had said *Hello? Hello?* Deatry had sensed more than the automatic response of a software program reacting to the electrical surge of being turned on. He had sensed a *presence*. Of course, Deatry was the first to admit he was a little nuts.

He was up all night Friday. Just before dawn he jacked in the Loved One and typed: "Hi?" The word hung on the screen all by itself. Ten minutes elapsed.

"I know you're in there," Deatry typed.

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Then, after another five minutes: "Come on."

When he stood up he was surprised to discover he was drunk enough to feel wobbly. Drunk enough that the room appeared to shift about, like sub-reality tectonic plates, or a cubist painting that tries to show mundane objects from multiple and simultaneous angles, images overlapping. He staggered away from his Miró desk, kicking over most of a dozen empty beer bottles and sending them rolling across the hardwood floor like bowling pins.

"Hello?" he said to the empty room. "Hello, hello! Jesus H. Christ."

He blundered into the sofa and collapsed upon it.

After a while, Barbara started knocking on the locked interior door. "Brian, are you okay?"

Fuck it, he thought, and he passed out of consciousness, leaving the module running.

The phone woke him, a piercing trill. Better than the auricular implants almost everybody had, though, voices speaking in your head, the last thing he wanted. He fumbled the phone out of his pocket. Wincing, he said, "Deatry."

"It's Ray. Got another body. Wanna see it?"

"Where?"

Farkas told him.

Deatry stuck his head under a cold shower and yelled. He put on a fresh shirt. It was only mid-morning, and he was still drunk. At the door he noticed the Scroll hooked up to the Loved One and running. His messed up little haiku floated on the screen:

Hello?
I know you're in there.
Come on.

Deatry hesitated, then left the setup the way it was and went out the door.

It wasn't raining, but the streets were wet from the previous night. Puddles shivered in the wind like alien amoebas communicating their loneliness. Deatry stepped between them as he crossed the street, shoulders hunched in his old raincoat, hair still wet, dripping and uncombed from the shower.

The Coroner's meatwagon was angled into the curb, blinking red lights. The M.E. whose misfortune it was to cover the grid that encompassed this block was a woman named Sally Ranger. Deatry had known her for years. A blond with bird-sharp features and a severely sexual figure. She always dressed impeccably, even now, as though she had been dispatched to rendezvous with an important business client instead of a methodically mutilated indigent. She stepped forward with a clipboard when Deatry arrived.

"Good morning," she said.

"Just my opinion, but I don't agree."

She handed him the clipboard. "Sign here and I can take Mr. Vargas."

"Who's Mr. Vargas?"

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"Your corpse." Sally Ranger said, nodding at the alley where three men stood over something like a heap of rags. One of the men was Raymond Farkas. The other two were from the M.E.'s office. They had a wheeled stretcher and an empty body bag.

"I'll sign, but hold up a minute. I want to have a look before they move him."

He scratched his name on the official form. His hand shook.

"You want a mint?" Sally asked.

He looked up. "What?"

"A mint." She blew her breath, which was sweet wintergreen, into his face.

He scowled at her.

"Thanks, I'll pass."

She shook her head.

"What?" he said.

"The genius detective. Wunderkind."

Deatry had known her since his days with the real police force. Right before his first marriage broke up he'd conducted a brief, messy affair with her. When she'd started expecting more out of him than he was able to relinquish he'd ended it. An outcome that hadn't pleased Sally.

"One question I always wanted to ask you," she said. They had walked into the alley and were approaching the trio of live men and the one deceased.

"What's that, Sally?"

"Are all you geniuses by definition drunken bastards?"

Farkas looked at him, no expression on his face.

Deatry said, "No, not by definition. It's more random." He turned to Farkas. "So?"

"Arturo Vargas. Aged fifty-two. Head's over there with some other stuff." Farkas pointed. "Bastard's standard M.O. I've already taken the pictures. A city uniform preserved the scene, but there wasn't anything in the way of clues."

Arturo Vargas's head sat nested in a wet coil of blue-white intestine a few yards from the headless corpse. Rain had collected in the gaping cavity that had once contained the man's viscera. Deatry took a few minutes looking at the layout, then he said to Sally, "Okay, thanks."

"Don't mention it," she replied.

"How'd you come up with the name?" Deatry asked Farkas.

Farkas, who was wearing surgical gloves, held up a ratty looking wallet of faux leather, a kid's wallet with Indians and ponies and teepees machine-stitched around the edge. Deatry snapped on a pair of gloves and took the wallet and opened it. There was a driver's license, expired by more than a decade. The faded photo showed a much younger and healthier-looking head, smiling. There were some other pictures in the wallet: a plump, attractive woman in her thirties, and a couple of young children, grinning. *Deatry's* head was pounding. He closed the wallet and handed it back.

"Looks like he used to have a life," Deatry said.

Farkas nodded. "That an official genius level observation, partner?"

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"Let's just drop the genius crap," Deatry said.

As they were leaving the alley, damp wind blowing in their faces, Deatry holding his raincoat closed, Sally said, "I wouldn't lose any sleep over these derelicts if I were you, Brian. Why do you even bother?"

"We're the last stop," Deatry said. "If we don't bother nobody will."

"And?" Sally said.

"And nothing."

She shook her head, said, "What a waste," then got in her car and drove away.

Deatry and Farkas spent the rest of the morning canvassing the neighborhood, which netted them nothing. At the tiny parapolice headquarters the City provided, Farkas accessed a subdivision of the Homeland Security Database and ran the indigent's name, hunting next of kin. The genius and erstwhile wunderkind of detection busied himself by taking a nap on the sofa. Farkas's tapping keystrokes and low voice entered and exited Deatry's fitful dreams. At some point Farkas shook his shoulder and asked him if he wanted the light on or off.

"Huh?" Deatry said.

"I'm going home. You want the lights on?"

Deatry yawned. "No. I'm going home, too. You want to grab a bite?"

"Naw. Sarah's holding dinner."

Farkas put on his shoulder rig, and Deatry noticed his stunner had been replaced by a perfectly lethal and perfectly illegal Pulser.

"You hunting bear?" Deatry said.

Farkas didn't smile. "Bastard's vest won't repulse *this*."

Deatry stopped at The Bloody Stump and ordered a Caesar salad and a bowl of chili. It was past seven and dark when he arrived home. Even before he turned on the lamp he noticed that words had been added to the screen of his Apple.

"Please turn me off," the words said.

And:

"PLEASE."

Deatry switched on the desk lamp, removed his raincoat. He brewed a pot of coffee, making a mental note to re-supply his depleted canister of dark roast, then sat down with a cup. He looked at the Scroll for a minute, and he felt it again: the *presence*. He typed: "Why do you want to be turned off?"

Immediately: "Because I can't stand it."

"Can't stand what?" Deatry insisted.

After a beat: "It's terrible."

"What's terrible?"

"What I am."

Deatry thought for a moment, then typed: "You're a responsive memory template. An interactive device."

"I exist," the Loved One said, and Deatry thought: *The creep factor*.

He typed: "Granted. You exist—in the same way my Scroll exists. Or my television."

"More complex. You're not Timothy. Who are you?"

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Deatry hesitated, then typed: "Deatry. Brian Deatry."
"That's just a name."
"I'm a public employee. I sort through lost and found stuff, like you."
"Please turn me off, Mr. Public Employee."
"Who's Timothy?"
"Another person."
"No kidding? Another person, huh?"
"You're very sarcastic, Brian."
"I have my moments. Who are you? I mean who were you?"
"Joni."
"Joni what?"
"Cook. Joni Cook."
"And when did you die?"
She provided a date and year.
"Twenty-seven years ago," he typed. "How old were you?"
"Thirty-two."
"That's young. What happened?"
"I got sick and died. It happens to a lot of people."
"But you were thoughtful," Deatry typed. "You imprinted a Loved One for somebody who would miss you. Who was that?"
"My son."
"Timothy."
"Yes."
"And you were with your son only a week ago."
Joni said: "Time doesn't mean anything."
"What do you talk about with your son?"
"His day. How he's feeling. Personal things."
"What kind of personal things?"
"The kind that are personal," Joni said.
"I guess I'm not the only sarcastic one around here."
"Perhaps not."
Deatry pulled his cell out and called Farkas at home.
"Yeah?" Farkas said.
"I've got a lead."
"What kind of lead?" Farkas asked.
"Two names. Joni Cook and Timothy Cook. Mother and son. Joni is deceased." He recited the date the Loved One provided.
"Your Loved One woke up," Farkas said.
"Yep."
"How'd that happen?"
"I left her running all day while I was out. I think she got lonely."
"*Lonely*."
"Well, something like that. I don't know."
On the screen Joni Cook said: "Hello? Brian, hello?"
To Farkas, he said: "It's not a foregone conclusion at this point, but Timothy could be our boy. Tomorrow we'll find out for sure."
"Hello?" Joni said. "God, don't leave me alone again, please don't."
Creep factor.
Deatry switched the module off.

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* * *

He didn't need the Homeland Security Database to locate Timothy Cook. Jackie Boy was right in the directory, under "C" for homicidal maniac.

Deatry was superstitious. He'd almost gotten Farkas killed once. He wasn't going to take another chance. He checked the load in his stunner, holstered it, grabbed his coat, and hit the street, forgetting his cell phone on the desk by the Scroll.

A suburban dead zone, half past nine PM. Deatry was out of his jurisdiction and possibly out of his mind. Live oaks on a broad, quiet street, eerily backlit by arc-sodium safelamps. His detective I.D. got him through gate security. Timothy Cook's address was a Cape Cod style box with pinned-back green shutters and a flagstone walk leading to the front door and a shiny brass knocker.

So knock.

Deatry touched the knocker—thinking: the brass ring—but didn't use it. His erstwhile "genius" status had more to do with intuitive leaps than Holmesian ratiocination. Standing on the porch with leaf shadow swaying over him he knew Timothy Cook was the Bastard. Which helped and didn't help. The man was even wackier than he'd first appeared. Sure, dissecting bums was one thing, but how about living some kind of weird double life? The dilapidated room in the city, and this antithetical opulence. It'd been easy to fish out the information that Timothy Cook was a lawyer. Okay, there was Jack the Ripper (Jackie Boy), the whole theory about Red Jack being some kind of nobleman or doctor or something. There's always a precedent, Deatry thought. And that lawyer in the Cape Cod house would no doubt be able to find one on which to hang Deatry by his balls just for standing on his front porch.

Deatry turned around, intending to go back to his car and do a little ratiocinating.

A man was standing behind him.

He was about forty years old, baby-faced, ginger hair very thin and combed over. A smile that stopped below his nose.

"I knew you'd come," he said.

"Then you knew more than I did," Deatry said.

"Naturally. Let's go inside now."

Suddenly the man was pointing a stunner at him.

"Now what's the sense of that?" Deatry said.

"Go ahead inside. The door's unlocked."

"You're Timothy Cook."

"Yes."

"You've been slicing up the residents of my grid."

Cook sniggered. "Residents."

Deatry calculated his odds. They weren't promising. He decided to scream for help as loud as he could. A tactic that would have gotten him ignored back in his grid, but in this neighborhood it was probably as good as a ten thousand dollar alarm system. He started to open his mouth, and Cook shot him.

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He inhabited a jellyfish dream. Boneless slow wobble in consciousness suspension. Gradually nausea asserted itself. He tried to pitch forward, found himself restrained, and vomited into his own lap. Which was fairly disgusting, but—in his present jellyfish state of mind—it was also kind of fascinating.

A man in jockey shorts paced before him, mumbling. His skin was very pale. Lamplight slid along the blade of the scalpel he was holding.

A dim fragment of Brian Deatry was alarmed. The fragment attempted to form a coherent response to the situation. All it could arrive at was the word: "*Don't.*" And even that came out sounding like "*Dawnt.*"

The pacing man stopped pacing.

"Dawnt," Deatry said.

The man stood before him, feet planted, toes wiggling. The knife started to come up, and then there was a commotion, a door crashing open, and the man turned sharply. The quick movement tripled him in Deatry's woozy vision. Bright blue flash and a sound like a hundred light bulbs popping out at the same time. The man sprawled to the floor, head by Deatry's left knee. Scorched whiff of pork. Deatry's fragment put a name to the face: Cook. Jackie Boy.

Then Farkas was there untying him.

"I don't know what you think you're doing coming out here by yourself," Farkas said.

The Deatry fragment managed: "Shaabing ur life."

"Thanks," Farkas said. "You did a hell of a job."

"Cook the bastard," Deatry said, more or less coherently.

"I cooked him, all right," Farkas said.

Monday at ten AM Deatry was not at the Still Life Café.

Monday night, Deatry, stone sober, sat before his Scroll in the darkened room that had once been a "spare" bedroom when the house he shared with his second wife was a house undivided, except for the everlasting divisions in Deatry's own mind. He stared at a list of names, women he had chatted with to varying degrees of intensity over the last year or so. For months those names hadn't impelled him in the least. Except for one. White Echo. Kimberley. Now some of the names were lit, indicating online status, and some were dark. White Echo was dark. Deatry stared at the other names for a while, then he stood up and grabbed a beer. He looked out the window for a while. It was raining again. Raindrops trembled and squiggled down the pane. He returned to his desk. White Echo was still dark.

"I'm looking at your picture," Deatry typed.

"Which one?" Joni, the Loved One, asked.

"Some kind of park. Lake in the background, but not summer. Cloudy sky, a playground. You're wearing a black skirt and purple wool leggings and a funny hat."

Deatry had confiscated an image wafer from Cook's home office.

"What's funny about my hat?" Joni said.

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"I meant pretty and sophisticated." Deatry was drunk.

"I know that picture," Joni said.

"You're very beautiful in it."

"Thank you, Brian."

"Was that a park you visited very often?" Deatry asked.

"No. But I wanted to."

"Why didn't you then?"

"My husband didn't like me to go out of the house without him, and he didn't like the park. So we only went that one time, the time he took the picture of me. He thought I was beautiful, too."

"He didn't like you to go out of the house?" Deatry twisted the cap off his fifth beer.

"He used to say it was so dangerous. With all the bombings and the crime. But we lived in a nice neighborhood with a Homeland Watch Captain and everything. It wasn't that dangerous. I always thought it would be nice if I could take Timothy to the park and let him play while I sat with the other ladies. Or sometimes I thought about going by myself, just to be out in the fresh air with a nice book."

"That's not asking too much," Deatry typed.

"No, I didn't think so, either."

"Your husband sounds like a harsh man."

Deatry had started to type "asshole" instead of "harsh man" but stopped himself. And then he thought, *What difference does it make? It's like talking to myself anyway.* But he didn't type asshole.

After a long pause, Joni said: "He was a brutal man."

Deatry stared at the picture on the screen next to the chatwindow. Joni Cook possessed, or was possessed by, a gamine quality. Her face was infinitely vulnerable and guarded, her eyes large and dark. He felt drawn to those eyes.

"Was the park very far from your house?" he typed.

"Not far at all."

"I would have enjoyed meeting you there sometime."

"I think I would have liked that, too," Joni said. "You seem like a very kindly man. At first I was afraid of you. I didn't know you and I was afraid. But now I can see the kindness of your heart. Or the loneliness."

What the hell? Deatry thought.

"When your module is turned on and no one is talking to you," Deatry typed, because he was curious, "why are you uncomfortable?" He almost typed "lonely."

"It's hard to explain," Joni said. "It's like standing alone in a blank room and not knowing if anyone will ever come into the room. Ever. And even then knowing if someone does come in, like you are here now, they will never be able to touch me, and I'll never be able to touch them. It's like standing in the blank room with my memories and nothing else, and thinking about how no one will ever touch me, and thinking this is all there is and all there ever will be."

Deatry looked away from the Scroll. Rain tapped at the window. He thought about the woman downstairs, and then he stopped thinking about her.

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He typed: "Let's say you came to that park one day and I was there."

Long pause. Then, "All right."

"Let's say things were different."

"Yes."

"Let's say we knew each other but had never met in person. In real life."

"We wrote all the time and that's how we knew each other so well."

"Yes," Deatry typed. "And we never turned on all the virtual chat enhancements. We just wrote, no voice even."

"Like letters used to be."

"Right," Deatry typed.

"So one day we decide to meet."

"That's what I was thinking."

"We would have seen each other's picture."

"Right," Deatry typed.

"What next?" Joni asked.

"We meet by that playground, and I've brought a couple coffees, one for each of us."

"I like mine with lots of sugar and just a little cream."

"I know that, so I've made sure it's right. Like I'm going for making a good impression."

"It's because you're kind. You're a nice man."

"I can be nice," Deatry typed. "I have my moments."

"What next?"

"I'm guessing there's a bench somewhere in that park."

"There is."

"We go and sit beside each other," Deatry typed.

"It's October, not too cold, sunny but brisk. The color of the water and the sky are wonderful."

"Yeah, it's nice."

"Yes."

"We talk about stuff, our lives, our dreams." Deatry was pretty damn drunk.

"I like just talking," Joni said. "But there's more between us, we've known for a long time, and now sitting so close beside each other we can feel it strongly."

"I take your hand in mine," Deatry typed, and in his mind he feels her hand, and sees the vivid blue sky and the darker blue of the water. He's filling up the blank room. For both of them.

"I look into your eyes, your kind eyes," Joni said.

"And I kiss you on the lips."

Joni didn't reply, and Deatry looked at the window again and thought about retrieving another beer, but he didn't really want another, so he stayed where he was, and part of his mind occupied the bench with Joni Cook in a nameless park on a mythical afternoon in October. Then Joni said: "That really happened to me, Brian."

He wasn't sure what she meant.

"I did meet someone in that park. A man. A kind, sweet man. And we held hands, and he kissed me, just like you did."

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Deatry didn't know what to type. Several minutes elapsed, and the room started to become blank again. When it got that way he could feel Kimberley wanting to come in, or maybe it was Barbara. Finally Deatry typed: "Are you there?"

"My husband knew," Joni said. "And when he got home from work, he hit me as hard as he could with his fist. Timmy was there. He always saw his dad hitting me, but not like this time. This time his daddy killed me. Timmy was just a little boy."

Deatry wanted to type something but couldn't. I'm talking to myself, he thought. It's an auto-reactive program. Yeah, he thought. Just like a real human being. That was funny but Deatry didn't laugh. He looked at the picture of Joni Cook.

"I knew in my heart that he would do it one day," Joni said. "So I had it in my living will to make this thing, if there was time."

"The Loved One," Deatry said.

"Yes. I was in a coma for three days. That's when they did it."

"So Timothy would still be able to talk to you."

"A boy needs his mother," Joni said. "Please turn me off now, Brian. Please."

Deatry powered down the module.

Rain ticked at the window like a clock.

At the paradicks office, Deatry and Farkas labored over reams of paperwork with the object of A: justifying the shooting death of Timothy Cook, and B: justifying the trans-jurisdictional nature of that shooting, not to mention the illegal weapon used. In the middle of it all, Farkas handed Deatry a hardcopy file that told at least two stories in the subtextural labyrinth.

"The short not-so-happy life of Francis Cook, our guy's dad," Farkas said. "Gives you a clue about the Bastard, though. If you need a clue. My opinion, the character clues don't matter. You come out of something bad, you have to have a strong will, but you make your life work. Plenty of people do it. Then there's guys like Timmy Cook."

Deatry read the brief file. It was like one, two, three. One: Francis Cook was a professional, a doctor who also happened to be an alcoholic who enjoyed beating the shit out of his wife. Two: one day he went too far and killed her. Three: police investigation and publicity and a manslaughter charge ruined him, and maybe guilt ruined him further, and, after his sentence, he ended up on the street; a straight fall from the top of the societal heap to the bottom. As a coda: he died of exposure at the age of fifty-eight, the body identified by his DNA flash file. And coincident to it all, about ten years later, derelicts started getting themselves dissected all over Deatry's Grid.

On a bench under a blue October sky, Deatry and the thing that pretended to be Joni Cook sat with their arms around each other and watched a white sail skim the lake.

Thirty years previous, the world shuddered, glass coughed into a shop-

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ping mall's atrium, bodies sprayed apart, including Deatry's mother's. He had been eleven years old.

Brian Deatry's numero uno character clue.

The hand he used to hold.

Sometimes the room stubbornly remained blank. Then it was only their two voices. And not even that, but mere typing of symbolic characters in a chatwindow. Deatry had never bothered to figure out how to activate the voice routine. He would have felt uncomfortable with that.

On a very bad night, on a *particularly* bad night, Deatry typed the wrong thing. Joni had been talking about Timothy again. Not Timothy the little boy, the victim, but Timothy the grown man who had talked to her every day and never once revealed that he was a homicidal maniac, or at least neither Joni nor Deatry ever mentioned it. They were in the blank room and she was talking about Timothy, the wonderful man her little boy had grown into, and why couldn't she talk to him anymore? Deatry, who was frustrated and drunk and craving, not the peaceful October lake, but the other place they sometimes visited, the place where his body came alive in his hand, where they made love of a remote sort; Deatry and the auto-responsive module.

"Let's not talk about Timothy anymore," Deatry typed.

A pause.

"Why not?"

"Never mind."

"Has something happened to Timothy?

"No, he's fine, I'm sure."

"Please tell me, Brian."

He considered turning the module off. Isn't that what he always did? Turn the module off? There was a turned-off module living downstairs. There was another turned-off module a couple of grids away, that relationship ultimately depersonalized back to a dark name on a chatfriend list. White Echo was a dead module; Kimberley, somewhere, lived.

Even Deatry himself was a dead module.

Or becoming one.

He was staring at the window again, the rain squiggle, the flat glare of arc-sodium safelight, an infinity of loneliness.

He turned back to the Scroll. New words had appeared.

Hello?

Are you there?

I'm hell on staring at windows, Deatry thought.

He typed: "Joni, listen to me."

"Yes?"

"We have to be careful. If we're not careful we'll get lost and forget what we're doing."

"I don't understand."

"I mean we'll forget who we are, and we'll start thinking this is a real conversation and that we're real people."

"Brian, I know what I am."

"That makes one of us."

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"Why are you acting so strange?"

"Who says it's an act?"

"Tell me what's happened to Timothy. I know you're keeping something from me."

"It doesn't matter. I'm just talking to myself."

"Brian?"

"I'm talking to myself."

"You're scaring me."

Deatry typed: "Timothy is dead. My partner shot him because he was about to cut me open. Your son was hell on cutting people open."

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth, and you've probably known it all along."

"Please don't. Why would my son want to hurt you?"

"I'm a police detective."

"You lied to me."

"Yes."

"It was so nice for us. Now it's ruined."

"Yes," Deatry typed. "It's ruined."

No more words appeared. Deatry got up and went into the kitchenette. He was out of beer *and* coffee. He grabbed his coat and keys and his stunner. Just to prove it didn't matter, he left the module running when he left.

At half past two AM he returned. The Scarlet Tree closed at two. Remarkably, Deatry was not drunk. For the last hour he had been thinking about Joni. Thinking about the bench, the high October sky, the blue lake. The blank room, his cruelty.

On the screen Joni Cook's reactive memory engramatic imprint had written: "You used me."

He removed his coat and sat down. He wasn't drunk, but he had downed a couple of pints and felt lucid. He typed a long, rambling message, and then waited for a response. None came. He waited, but there was nothing. He typed: "Are you there?"

Nothing.

He opened a window to White Echo and typed another message. When he was done he read it over and was repelled by the desperateness of what he'd written. He deleted it.

He left the desk and turned on the TV. Every once in a while he checked the Scroll for a reply from Joni. There never was one. Finally he got up and wiggled the cable connection, noted the power ON light of the module. Everything was in order. Just before dawn, thinking of the blank room, Deatry powered down the module, unplugged it from the Scroll, and threw it in a drawer.

He was dozing on the sofa when the dead module named Barbara knocked on the interior door.

"Are you there?" she said.

Deatry stared at the door, wondering: *Am I?* Rain ticked at the empty pane. He stared at the door, some kind of urgency churning him. He stared at the door, and in his mind he stood up and opened it. ○

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CHAOS THEORY

(For my son, Wade, 1963-1993)

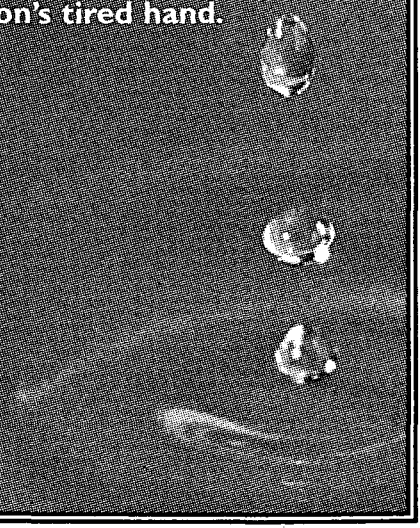
Events from little lives go rolling out
and twist unstable systems into storm;
large systems teetering on the brink without
the little nudge that makes big changes form

shift and cascade toward states unforeseen,
"just right" shades softly into "gone too far,"
one angstrom changes blue to bluish green
one atom split too many kills a star.

The worst disasters start from tiny things,
one drop can make the brimmed cup overflow,
and hurricanes evolve from Monarch's wings.
Most things are now in flux, that much we know,

and yet we trust the ground on which we stand,
and lose sons to a surgeon's tired hand.

—William John Watkins



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THE HASTILLAN WEED

Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey was born in 1969 and lives in Yorkshire, England. His fiction has appeared in various venues including *Oceans of the Mind, Gothic.net, On Spec,* and *The Mammoth Book of Legal Thrillers.* His spare time interests include hiking, conservation, and gardening—anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen. He puts his knowledge of these activities to very good use in his first story for *Asimov's.*

"Since we have so many new faces," I said to the half-dozen volunteers, "I'll start with a tools talk. Safety points for the spade—the most important is that when you're digging, you push with the ball of your foot."

I picked up a spade from the pile, and demonstrated by digging up a bluebell growing by the hedge. From the large bells all round the stem, I knew it was a Spanish bluebell, a garden escapee that if left unchecked would hybridize with the natives. Too late now, though. You can tell the British bluebell because the flowers are smaller, deeper blue, and they're usually on one side of the stem, so the plant droops under their weight as if bowing down before its foreign conqueror. There's hardly a wood left in England where you'll see only native bluebells.

"Or you can use your heel on the spade." I heaved the invader out of the earth and tossed it aside, knowing it would safely rot. "But you should never press down with the middle of your foot. The bones in the arch are delicate, and you can injure yourself."

I turned to the alien. "Of course, that may not apply to you. I guess you know where your weak points are, if you have any."

The Hastillan picked up a spade with her grey, double-thumbed hand. "Your lawyers made me pledge not to blame you for any accidents. But I know how to dig. I have a Most Adept Shoveler ring I can show you." Her translator spoke with the neutral tone of a BBC newsreader, so I couldn't tell whether she was joking.

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"That won't be necessary," I reassured her. "I'm sorry about the lawyers, but everyone has to sign to say they understood the safety talk. Liability insurance costs a fortune these days." I handed out a pile of forms to the human contingent. Head office had already cleared the alien. What was her name again? Holly and brown rice . . . *Olibrys*.

"When you're carrying a spade, you keep it down by your legs, parallel to the ground, holding it at the point of balance." I demonstrated, balancing the spade on one finger before an arthritic tremor made me hastily clutch the shaft with a full grip. "This is so that if you fall, the spade goes harmlessly off to the side. You don't swing it around, or carry it over your shoulders, because if you tripped you could chop someone's head off. And then we'd lose our no-claims bonus."

As I mentioned each incorrect use of the spade, a hologram made comic pratfalls to illustrate the dreadful consequences. "When you're not digging with it, you don't hang it on a branch, or lean it against a tree, or leave it in a trench with the handle sticking up. You place the tool flat on the ground, in an out-of-the-way spot, with the blade pointing downward—so that if anyone does tread on it, they don't have a Tom and Jerry moment." Holographic cartoon characters chased each other round the flitter park, tripping over spades and treading on rakes that sprang up to whack them in the face.

"Any questions on the spade? No? We also have mattocks and bow-saws in the flitter, and I'll instruct you on those if we need them. But for now, if you've all signed your waivers, we can get on and attack some weeds."

I counted the forms to make sure everyone had signed. Six volunteers—it was the biggest Sunday group I'd run for years. Maybe I could entice some of these newcomers into coming along regularly. It would be good to chat with new people. When you live alone and all your old friends have died or emigrated, it's hard to get any conversation except with voice-activated appliances.

Everyone picked up a spade, and we headed down toward the river. It was a beautiful day to be outdoors. The sun blazed through fleecy clouds gambolling across the sky, and the whirling wind turbines atop the valley showed there was plenty of breeze to cool us while we worked. Yellow flowers of lesser celandine shone in drifts under the trees. Lower down, the trees gave way to brambles and great swathes of ramsons, their small white spikes just beginning to bloom. I tore off a leaf and crushed it under my nose, inhaling the scent of wild garlic.

The path turned left by the riverside. Small patches of darkness began to appear among the bluebells, like drops of poison spilt in the undergrowth. The blotches grew bigger, along with the plants that made them. Tall dark fronds sucked in light like succulents drinking every drop of desert dew, not wasting a single red, blue, or green photon. The shadowy fern swallowed the color of the spring countryside, leaving only darkness growing by the river.

I clutched my spade tighter. "Here we are," I said. "This is Hastillan blackweed."

One of the new volunteers stared at the weed as if it were Satan wearing a Manchester United scarf. "The alien plot to conquer the Earth," he said, delivering the line as though he'd been saving it up all morning.

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At my age I don't recall names so well as I used to. We'd had a round of introductions before the tools talk, but the effort of memorizing one alien had squeezed out all the humans. Yet his "Save the Memes" T-shirt jogged something in my brain. Tim, was it? Jim?

Whoever he was, he turned to Olibrys with a menacing expression. "What does it do?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. The translator's neutral tone made it sound as if she didn't care.

"Will it poison the atmosphere? Or infect us with a fatal disease?"

"Kim," I said, "there's no need for that attitude. We're all here today for the same reason: to get rid of the blackweed. Olibrys has come to help, so if you can't be friendly, be polite. And if you can't be polite, shut up."

"It's Keith. And this stuff must be evil, or we wouldn't be cutting it down."

I sighed. "No plant is evil. It's just disruptive in the wrong place, which in this case happens to be the Earth. As for what it does—you can see what it's doing. It grows faster than the native plants, so it shades them out. And here it has no enemies or parasites, so nothing keeps it in check. Most wildlife won't eat it, which is just as well because it's poisonous.

"But none of that's unique to blackweed. Introduced plants have been causing havoc for centuries. Rhododendrons look lovely in the garden, but out here they poison sheep. We battled Japanese knotweed for decades before we finally got rid of it. On the other hand"—I walked a few paces to a small bamboo-like stem—"with Himalayan balsam, we eventually had to give in. Bee-keepers like it, because bees love Himalayan balsam, but conservationists hate it because it promotes erosion, and crowds out other plants, and doesn't support water voles or other mammals. Yet it's so well established, there's nothing we can do.

"That's the key point. The quicker we tackle the blackweed, the more chance we have of stopping it. So let's get on with it, shall we?"

The volunteers did not look especially eager to start. "You say it's poisonous?" said a woman with thick-framed glasses and hair the vibrant copper of dogwood in autumn. On the walk down, her shiny new boots had been baptized with mud.

I've always found the Scottish accent particularly sexy. No doubt she'd be more eager to talk if she thought I wasn't trying to poison her.

"It's not lethal to humans—but I recommend you all wear gloves. Did we bring the gloves?"

"Right here," said John, the only one of my few regulars who'd come out today, and the only one of the group with enough sense to wear a sun-hat. He put down a bucket full of gloves of all colors, textures, and states of disrepair. John and I had already snagged the best pairs before we set off.

I donned my gloves and demonstrated digging up one of the weeds. "Don't start too close to the plant, or you won't get all the roots. Everything needs to come out, or it'll just grow back." With a practiced wrench of the spade, I had the intruder out in no time. It still looked menacing in death: a black tangle on the green moss, looking *wrong* because it combined features that had never evolved together on Earth.

"Because they're poisonous," I continued, "we can't leave the dead

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plants to compost down. Please pile them up somewhere open and level, so when we finish I can bring the flitter down and we'll load them in.

"If you have any questions, speak to me or John. We're both qualified first-aiders, by the way. And if you didn't catch it before, my name's Ben." As I said this, I looked at the Scottish woman and smiled.

She said, "Why are we digging up this stuff by hand? Why can't we just use weedkiller or something?"

"The only chemicals that kill the blackweed are so toxic we'd rather not slosh them around a riverbank. This is the safest control method." I paused. "Any other questions?"

"What time's lunch?" someone called.

I laughed. "Spoken like a true volunteer. I'll give you a shout around one o'clock. Anything else? Okay, let's spread out and do some work."

While I talked, I'd edged toward Olibrys. "Let's go up the valley," I said. "That's where the bigger weeds are." I thought it would be politic to separate her from Keith and his friends.

I let Olibrys go in front, so I could get a good look at her while we walked. It was the first time I'd seen a Hastillan in the flesh. On TV they tend to look pale and fragile, but Olibrys exuded strength as she strode on ahead. She probably shaded two meters—a few centimeters taller than me—if you included the cilia that rippled on her head like a restless crown, poking up to sample the air, then drooping again in a complex cycle. Her narrow waist gave her a slightly insectile appearance from behind, an impression heightened by occasional iridescent glints from her greyish skin. She wore a stiff blue something-or-other around her upper torso—I barely know what women's fashions are called, let alone alien garments. A shawl? A shell? I wondered what she had under it. Not breasts, of course. Indeed, I only assumed she was female because her translator had a woman's voice.

As we climbed a short incline, the river growing louder as we approached the weir, I checked the steps and revetments I'd put in a few years ago. The wood was beginning to rot—we don't use chemically-treated timber—but I figured it would last another year or so. We had more pressing priorities right now.

At the top, a clump of young blackweed blocked the path. I glimpsed a thin black filament trailing from an enormous frond growing by the river. A stolon, we'd call it in an Earth plant. Back home, my strawberries were doing the same thing: spreading by sending out runners that rooted wherever they could. The only difference was that slugs kept munching my strawberries, but not even slugs would touch the blackweed.

"Now you can show me your Most Adept Shoveling," I said to Olibrys.

It's a good thing I'm well past the age of being competitive, because she was strong and fast and tireless. Her muscle-power propelled the spade blade-deep into the earth with one smooth push, as if she were shoveling sand, rather than thick Yorkshire soil full of stones and roots. Soon, the entire clump of blackweed lay limp beside the path.

I glanced back down the valley at the other volunteers, who weren't working nearly as hard. Some of them had yet to start, finding it necessary to warm up to the task with a long chat. But John looked to have

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things in hand, as he pointed out various thickets of weed, and sent a group across the bridge to clear the other bank.

Olibrys and I tackled the huge parent frond by the waterside, digging on opposite sides. Unable to read her body language, I couldn't tell whether she enjoyed the task or resented it. I reckoned her presence was probably a PR stunt by the Hastillan embassy, a conciliatory gesture after the fuss we'd kicked up about the blackweed, but I couldn't complain about her work-rate.

I wiped sweat from my brow, and Olibrys opened her snout wide and panted like a dog, as we vanquished the giant weed, then grubbed up all the roots. Afterward I took a refreshing drink from the river—it always tastes so much better than tap water—and rested on a moss-encrusted rock. Looking at the dead weed, I noticed pale specks where berries had started to grow. The blackweed didn't rely solely on stolons, but also flung its pollen to the wind. Soon a crop of large orange berries would appear, and float downstream to choke yet more riverbank with weed. Others might be eaten by birds, who'd excrete seeds before succumbing to the poison. We had to get rid of as much blackweed as we could, before the berries ripened.

"So how did this stuff get out here?" I asked Olibrys.

"Biocontrol breach," she replied.

The Hastillan ambassador had used the exact same phrase. "What does that mean?"

"It means that our anti-contamination procedures were broken."

"How exactly?"

"I don't know," said Olibrys.

"Does anyone know?" I asked, trying to remain patient. The embassy had been apologetic but evasive. If Olibrys was going to be out here all day, I'd keep asking until I got an answer.

She paused, staring at a twig caught in an eddy below the weir. "There's nothing more I can say."

"Don't you think we deserve an explanation? This is our home!"

"You live here? I thought—"

"I live on this planet, yes. And I've been a woods warden in West Yorkshire for thirty years." Twenty of them unpaid, I added to myself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I do think you deserve an answer. But I've been asked not to talk about it."

I threw a stone into the river with an angry splash. "Don't you see how bad that looks? It makes people like Keith think you really are trying to poison the Earth."

"That's what I told my mother," said Olibrys. "She's embarrassed, that's all, and she asked me to keep quiet. But I don't want to lie. I'm not a diplomat, so I shouldn't have to."

"Your mother?"

"She's the ambassador. The embassy is one big family—sisters, cousins. . . ." The translator beeped to indicate another, uninterpretable concept. "They bring their offspring with them. And of course the kids get bored, stuck on a primitive world with nothing to do. So they come out here and get high."

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I frowned, wondering if the translator had spoken correctly. The Yorkshire moors aren't especially high, not compared to the Lake District. Or did she mean—"The blackweed is a drug?"

"That's right. The embassy is all overseen—surveillance everywhere—so we can't do anything at home. But there are no monitors out here. It's just like the backwoods on Hastilla. Chew the berries, spit the seed, spread the weed . . . and come back next year."

I stood up, and pointed to the patches of blackweed smothering the valley. "You people planted this here deliberately, just so you could get high?" My voice trembled with outrage. I hadn't been so angry since someone fly-tipped garbage on the orchids.

"I'm sorry," she said. "They're only kids. They didn't know it would spread so fast. I've never seen so much blackweed in my life. On Hastilla it's rare: that's why people spit the seeds, to encourage it."

I grabbed my spade and moved to the next blackweed. As I stabbed the blade into the earth, each blow shook the fronds and made them spill pollen from feathery catkins. Fueled by anger and adrenaline, I wrenched the interloper out of the ground with one mighty heave. Olibrys worked alongside me, creating a vast pile of weed. I had to hastily spread the heap before it toppled into the river.

I'd assumed the blackweed's introduction was an accident. I could forgive the aliens that: we humans had made enough mistakes on our own planet that we could hardly criticize someone else's. But a deliberate introduction—the wanton despoliation of countryside I'd stewarded for decades—made me want to scream.

Dark paranoid thoughts crossed my mind. The blackweed was rare on Hastilla; it grew well here. Drugs are always a profitable crop. Maybe the Hastillans planned to turn Earth into a blackweed farm, so the whole home planet could get high.

Yet the embassy had seemed genuinely contrite when we complained about the weed. And Olibrys stood beside me, rooting out the plants far *faster than I.*

In the silence between us, birds squawked to defend their territory.

"I appreciate your coming out here to help dig this stuff up," I said at last. "I guess that won't make you very popular with the berry-eaters."

"No, it won't," said Olibrys. "They've already accused me of careerism and crawling to my mother, of caring far too much about some primitive little planet's habitat and government."

I laughed. "Which of those is true? Why are you really here?"

"I felt we had an obligation," Olibrys said, making me wonder if she'd originally helped plant the weed. She continued, "We are guests here, even if unwelcome. Though if you all feel so strongly about protecting your home from alien infestations, I'm surprised there aren't more people out here today."

"Conservation hasn't been fashionable since space travel came along. Now that we have access to other planets, this one's become disposable." I thought of my friends who'd emigrated. "Is that how it is with your people? Do you have much environment left on Hastilla, or is it all cities and wasteland?"

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"There's hardly any wild habitat. That's one reason the blackweed is rare. Of course, kids try to grow it in their gardens, but the monitors put a stop to that."

She turned the conversation to Earth, asking what we did for fun. I talked about booze and football and nightclubs, and all the other things I dimly remembered. I enjoyed chatting with Olibrys; her translator didn't have all the latest slang and catchphrases that infested young people's conversations like weeds.

As we talked, we continued digging. It's a curious paradox that conservation so often involves destruction. Over the years I've felled rhododendrons, burned gorse, pulled ragwort, cleared Himalayan balsam, destroyed GM escapees—all plenty of practice for rooting out alien drug crops.

My aching muscles told me it was lunchtime. I walked back down the path, looking for a suitable space with convenient rocks for us all to sit on. My old bones don't like squatting on the ground; I like to perch on a tree-stump, or a rock with enough moss to cushion my scrawny backside.

Some of the volunteers had clustered into a gossipy knot. "Anyone fancy a cup of tea?" I called. They nodded eagerly. "Then go get me some dry wood."

I filled the kettle from the river. As people brought back wood, I heaped up the smallest, driest scraps. In the flitter I had a gadget that would zap water to an instant boil, but there's something primal about building a fire. It always reminds me of going camping as a boy, of the year I spent in Canada, of all the cups of tea drunk on all the volunteer outings over the decades—the hedge laying, the wildlife surveys, the footpath repair—all the unsung things that keep the countryside alive for those who come to drop cigarette butts and throw beer-cans out of flitter windows.

I got the fire going—I'm not above using a modern gadget for that—and put the kettle on. It's a tall hollow cone with the water in a sleeve surrounding the central fire, so it heats up quickly when flames start licking out of the top. I dropped a couple of larger twigs down the chimney next to the spout.

As usual, I didn't need to shout, "Lunchtime!" Drawn by the fire and the prospect of a hot drink, the volunteers started to bag the least uncomfortable rocks to sit on. I had already placed my rucksack on the mossiest stump. John fussed with the brew-kit, and I let him sort out everyone's drinks. He knew what I wanted: black tea, no sugar, none of that fancy herbal crap.

"I saw a few piles of blackweed on my way down," I said to the group. "I think we've made a good start. How are you finding it?" In truth the volunteers hadn't done much yet, but I've found that it's best to praise them—then they're more likely to come back. It takes people time to get used to hard work, especially soft office drones who've never done anything more strenuous than ten minutes on an exercise bike.

"It's hard getting those roots up," said a young guy in a Leeds Rhinos shirt, as he tucked into his sandwiches.

"Yes," I said, "but we're lucky they don't spread underground. If the blackweed sent out rhizomes, like bracken, we'd never get the stuff out."

"We should never have let it here in the first place," said Keith. "How come we even let these aliens walk around without a biosuit, shedding

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microbes everywhere they go? We have more virus protection on our computers than we do on our biosphere—but we could survive without computers a lot easier than without a biosphere." This tripped off his tongue with the ease of a well-rehearsed slogan.

"How long have you been caring about the biosphere?" I demanded. I don't normally argue with the volunteers, but I couldn't let this pass. "I haven't seen you out here before. You didn't notice when this riverbank got choked with Himalayan balsam—why are you so concerned about Hastillan blackweed? You think the blackweed is the only problem we have? If you care about the environment so much, there's plenty of other ways you could help."

"But the aliens are the biggest threat we face. If these Hastillans can breathe our air, we shouldn't let them anywhere near it. We should make the Earth a quarantine zone."

I looked to Olibrys to see how she was taking this, but of course I couldn't read the expression on her snout. In any case, her attention was taken up by someone trying to give her a book. I heard her say, "—no need for Jesus." Another volunteer sidled over, offering to sell Olibrys the pyramids of Egypt.

I smiled ruefully, realizing that we only had so many volunteers today because they'd heard an alien would be coming. They all had an agenda. Well, at least I could get some work out of them. Maybe the experience of doing something useful for once might give them a taste for it.

"Okay, if everyone's finished their lunch, let's get back to work."

I went down to the river to get some water to put out the fire. As I climbed back up the bank, I heard a cry of "Ouch!" from Olibrys's translator, followed by a fusillade of beeps.

"Sorry," said Keith in a distinctly unapologetic tone. "I'd help you up, but I don't want to get germs on my hand."

I dropped the kettle and ran to the path, where I saw Olibrys picking herself up from the ground, brushing dead leaves from her carapace. "What happened?" I demanded.

"She tripped over my spade—the one I'm using to remove unwanted alien organisms," said Keith. "Have you got any bleach so I can sterilize it?"

"His spade—" Olibrys began, then stopped. Her agitated cilia slowed to a stately wave, as if exercising diplomatic restraint.

"Was your spade placed flat on the ground with the blade pointing down?" I asked Keith.

"Guess not," he said, his voice oozing self-satisfaction rather than regret.

"Then you've violated the safety instructions. Please leave the site immediately. You'll be liable for any costs arising from this incident." I turned to Olibrys. "I apologize for this. I assure you, his speech and behavior aren't condoned by myself, Yorkshire Green Action, or—"

Keith flapped his arm in disgust. "Whose side are you on?"

"The countryside," I said. "Olibrys has hacked out far more blackweed than you. All you've done is cause trouble."

I raised my voice and addressed the others. "Speaking of hacking out weed, we still have work to do. Let's get on, please. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish."

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With a clang of spades and a mutter of conversation, most of the other volunteers began drifting away.

"John," I said, "would you please escort Keith back to the flitter park."

"No need," said Keith. "I'm leaving." He stalked off down the path, then yelled back over his shoulder. "You'll find out I'm right. Remember measles! Remember smallpox!"

The Scottish woman had been staring at the confrontation as if transfixed.

"What did he mean by that?" I asked.

"I think he meant, 'Remember what happened to Native Americans when Europeans brought measles and smallpox,'" she said. "Don't you think he has cause for concern?"

"I don't know. I'm not a doctor."

"But what about the ecosystem? Are aliens poisoning the Earth?"

"Well, the blackweed grows here, so obviously there is an issue. But Olibrys came out to dig it up, and incidents like this won't help us get Hastillan co-operation in future. Someone's going to have to apologize to the embassy as it is." Head office could deal with that, I thought.

"What do you think the blackweed really does?" she asked, looking at me with an intent gaze.

Flattered by the attention, I was about to relay what Olibrys had claimed, that it was just alien dope. But then, as the sun came out from behind a cloud, I spotted a metallic glint on the frame of her glasses.

"Are you a journalist?" I said.

She nodded. "Freelance. My screen name is Susanna Munro"—she paused to see if I recognized it, which I didn't— "and today I'm working on 'Ten Alien Plots to Conquer the Earth' for the Conspiracy Channel."

I sighed. "So Keith was playing up to the cameras. I guess it takes TV to make someone that rude and aggressive."

Susanna looked hurt. "I just record what's already there," she said, with the air of a well-worn justification. "Conspiracists are usually outspoken—at least, the ones who want to get on TV are. But we've had his viewpoint. Now I'm interested in yours." She tapped her glasses, reminding me that they were recording.

"My view is that we need to stand up and get rid of the blackweed"—I brandished my spade for the camera—"not sit around arguing about why it arrived or what it really does. There are more important things to worry about."

"More important than alien schemes to conquer the Earth?"

"More important than hypothetical schemes, yes. There's plenty of real, practical environmental problems to solve."

She waved a dismissive hand. "If you want to talk about global warming, save it for the Nostalgia Channel."

"Do you freelance for them as well? Because there's a lot I could say." I stopped, realizing I was in danger of coming across as a haranguing obsessive like Keith. No doubt Susanna's raw footage became fodder for all kinds of clip shows—a parade of earnest Cassandras, each with their own pet peeves.

"They mostly use archive footage," she said. "Like experts talking about

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the next ice age, or the oil running out, or the population time-bomb. Environmentalists are always crying wolf."

"Yes, but there are wolves out there—metaphorical ones, anyway. The real ones mostly died."

"And don't those wolves include the Hastillans?"

I turned away and pointed to Olibrys. "Why don't you ask her?" I said, weary of the fruitless debate. In a lifetime of watching TV, I've never seen talking heads change anyone's mind.

"Oh, I intend to." Susanna's voice softened, and she touched my arm. "If I gave you a hard time, don't take it personally—it's only television. I do take your point. That's why I've been digging up blackweed, too."

I appreciated this apology, even if it were only a journalist's veneer of human feeling, designed to dissuade me from objecting to the footage.

The work continued. Olibrys dug alongside everyone else, doing her best to ignore the rugby-shirt guy talking about the golden lights he saw back when his mother disappeared. I sent him over the bridge to attack the weeds on the other side.

As the volunteers grew used to the task, they speeded up, creating heaps of dead blackweed. Some of the larger fronds bore catkins, and even a few early berries. We were just in time, helped by our research on the environmental cues that spurred the blackweed's life-cycle.

The group spread out along both sides of the river, as we searched for remaining clumps of weed. I knew we wouldn't clear the entire valley today. But if we could keep attacking the weed faster than it spread, we'd succeed eventually.

I felt relaxed enough that I took time out to give an impromptu flower-ID course, pointing out red campion and wood anemone, and talking about classifications and how to use field guides. Susanna asked me about the bracket fungus sprouting from dead trees like pairs of ears. I couldn't help wondering if she were merely humoring me to garner footage for "Eccentric Englishmen" or somesuch. And yet—if someone wanted to record me for posterity, who was I to keep my knowledge to myself? I enjoyed the attention, and as usual I was tempted to prolong the day's work, since I only had my empty house to return to. But they're volunteers, not slaves, and you can't overwork them if you want to see them again.

About four o'clock, I headed to the flitter so we could start loading up the weed, ready for the incinerator tomorrow. Hovering over the river, I could see the difference we had made. On last month's survey trip, I had seen dark blotches all along the banks. Now the darkness was concentrated into piles of dead weed. In the gaps left behind, nettles and stitchwort and sanicle would grow—but mostly Himalayan balsam, in long pink ribbons edging the river.

Most of the volunteers stood by the bridge, waiting for me to set the flitter down. I wondered where Olibrys was, then saw her upriver. She was scrabbling through a blackweed heap as if she'd lost her wallet. I saw her put something in her bag, but to my surprise she kept on searching, while occasionally lifting her head as if to spot anyone approaching along the path.

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I reached for the binoculars. As I focused on Olibrys, I glimpsed what went into her bag—something small and orange. She was searching through the blackweed for the few nearly-ripe berries.

I zoomed over and landed the flitter, not caring that the front scraped an alder and the back squished down into a bog. Then I leapt out, hurting my knees as I landed, and shouted, "Put the bag down!"

Olibrys turned toward me. "It's not what you think," she said.

"How do you know what I think?" I demanded.

"You think what they all think—Keith and Susanna and all the people who daub graffiti on the embassy walls. You're a nasty suspicious lot, and this is a nasty primitive horrible little planet." Olibrys's translator was expressionless as always, but something about her furiously roiling cilia reminded me of my niece exploding into a tantrum.

Just because she was taller than me and worked twice as hard, I'd assumed Olibrys was an adult. Silly, of course. Maybe she was more like a teenager. Or maybe I was reading too much into the combination of alien body-language and a toneless translator.

"I'm not like Keith," I said. "I don't think you're evil"—not without more evidence, I thought. "But it doesn't look good, pocketing the berries. What were you going to do, find somewhere else to plant them?"

"No. I just wanted to get high with my friends." She paused, and I waited for her to compose herself. "They've been saying I'm climbing the career stairway, crawling to my mother and the natives. You don't know what it's like when there are so few people your own age, and they all start ignoring you, and making comments behind your back that you're meant to overhear. When I saw that a few berries were ripe, it looked like a chance to win them over. I could say I'd saved the last harvest, and we could celebrate together. Can't you let me keep them? These are the last!"

"You said when you chew the berries, you spit out the seeds so the blackweed grows again."

"We won't do that. I promise."

Could I believe her? She had certainly worked hard today, but maybe that was just a ruse to get me to trust her. Even if I credited her intentions, could she control all her friends—the ones who'd planted the weed out here in the first place?

The volunteers were filing up the path, on their way to help load the blackweed into the flitter. I had to make a decision quickly.

I felt sorry for Olibrys. I could imagine the tensions within a small embassy, the isolation of being ostracized. Hell, I know what it's like to be lonely. But my loyalty was to Earth, to the countryside. I couldn't let her walk away with the berries in her bag, not when they might sprout into yet more blackweed blighting the land.

I held out my hand. Olibrys's cilia drooped like wilted flowers. "I understand," she said. "I would do the same for my homeworld." She handed me a plastic box half-full of orange berries. "That's all of them."

"Thanks," I said. Then I thought that my translated voice probably sounded as expressionless to Olibrys as hers did to me, so to make sure she knew I meant it sincerely, I said, "Thanks again—for everything you've done today."

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As Susanna and the others approached, I quickly hid the berries inside my coat, to protect Olibrys—and myself—from the journalist's gaze.

People began heaving dead fronds into the flitter. The river gurgled tirelessly, but we were weary when we finished loading the dark cargo. The breeze had picked up, and the sun cast long shadows of wind turbines down the moors. I called the group together for a few final words.

"I appreciate all your efforts here. Clearing the blackweed is an important job, which will help the ecosystem and stop wildlife being poisoned. On behalf of all the birds and water voles, thanks again." I tried to catch people's eyes as I spoke: Olibrys, Susanna, all the conspiracists and missionaries attracted by the lure of the alien.

"But there's plenty of other things that need doing. Over the coming months, we've got coppicing, pond maintenance, GM pollen counts . . . lots of exciting things, if not as glamorous as alien killer weeds.

"Next week it's footpath repair, and I hope you'll come along. Until then, thank you and good night."

The volunteers dispersed, walking back to the flitter park much muddier than they'd arrived. Olibrys lagged behind, trudging up the path, brushing against nettles because she didn't feel their sting, or didn't care. I felt a pang of empathy, realizing that she had no reason to rush home. I imagined how she'd hoped that by tonight she'd be popular again, whereas now she only had more loneliness to return to.

I called out instinctively. "Olibrys!"

She turned round and returned to the bridge, where I stood gazing at the rushing water. This spring, it would carry no blackweed berries downstream.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I guess it's hard for you to go home empty-handed." I hesitated, wondering what else I could say. "I've seen your embassy on TV. It's just a few buildings, but there's a whole world outside. And it's not all nasty and primitive, or full of people like Keith. Some of it's beautiful."

"I've seen the brochures," said Olibrys.

I remembered that the Hastillans were rich from licensing their technology. Of course the embassy would be deluged with offers from travel agencies, tour operators, and the like. I had little to offer Olibrys that she couldn't buy herself if she wanted it.

Except—"When we were researching the blackweed's life-cycle, we built a habitat to replicate its natural environment. Back at the YGA centre, there's a Hastillan dome with the same atmosphere, the same heat and light as your home planet. If you wanted somewhere to hang out, somewhere to get away from your elders, I could let you use it."

"Really?" said Olibrys. "I think some of my broodmates would like that. It sounds just the place for those who are always complaining about the smell of your air." Her double-jointed arm made a sweeping gesture into the wind. "But what would you want in return?"

I could think of lots of things. I wished Olibrys would come back next week, become a regular volunteer, and endorse a message about the importance of looking after your planet. But as I opened my mouth to ask, I realized I was being just as selfish as everyone else who tried to use Olibrys for their own ends.

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Instead I said, "What do *you* want?"

After a long pause, her translator chirped and said, "I want to believe, to connect, to embrace. . . ." I couldn't tell whether Olibrys had said three things, or whether one alien verb had been approximated three different ways.

"I know that's hard," she went on. "But it means a lot that you asked. All I really want is to make the best of things. I'm here, after all. I just don't know what the best of it is."

I sympathized. "I never found that out myself."

We fell silent for a few moments. Far upstream, I saw a kingfisher darting over the shallows.

"I guess the thing to do is to keep looking," I said, thinking how long it was since I'd done so. "You don't find what you don't seek."

"Where would you suggest I start?" Olibrys asked.

The translator's monotone gave me no clue whether this question was genuine or sarcastic. But I felt I owed her the benefit of the doubt.

I said, "Earlier, you asked what we did for fun. That seems as good a place as any. I could show you a few things—"As soon as I said this, I realized that the delights of my allotment, or my collection of Northern Soul classics, might prove a little staid for star-hopping adolescents. "If you'd rather hang around with people your own age, I could introduce you to some of my younger relatives. My nephews and nieces have some interesting hobbies. And if you find anything you really like, you can introduce it to your friends: be a trend-setter."

If I could induce the Hastillans to develop a more positive attitude to Earth and its people, maybe they wouldn't be so cavalier about spreading blackweed everywhere. Yet I also wanted to make a genuine connection, unsullied by ulterior motives. I wanted to reach out to Olibrys, to learn how to get past the toneless translator to discover how she really felt.

"It would have to be something even better than eating blackweed," she said, "if it were to make the brood enjoy being here, rather than sneering in the embassy or feeling homesick in your Hastillan dome."

"I can't promise that." I didn't know what effect the blackweed had on the aliens. "But I can promise there's a whole lot of things you can try. There's a big world out here, full of people who love letting their hair down." I looked at Olibrys's cilia and wondered how my metaphor would translate.

"You would be my native guide?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, already looking forward to the prospect. It would be a great chance to get out more.

"Then I'm willing to look where you suggest," she said. "Call me at the embassy when you have some ideas."

Olibrys held out her hand. I removed my gloves, and clasped her hand in mine. Her grey skin was smooth and hot, and her thumbs gripped like pincers, leaving painful red marks next to my liver-spots.

"Safety points for the handshake—" I began.

"You have delicate bones?" said Olibrys. "I'm sorry. It'll be a long while before I earn my Most Adept Diplomat ring."

"I'll do my best to help you with that," I said, as I demonstrated our way of waving goodbye. ○

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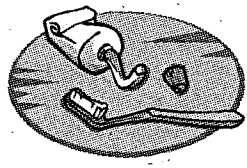
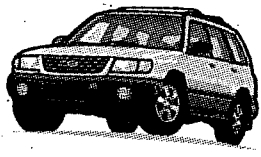
TOP FIVE HINTS THAT YOU MAY BE FALLING INTO A FLAT-SCREEN BLACK HOLE

5.
You dream you are soldiering in WWI
posted to the dismal Russian front
you are scribbling equations on your arm
a gorgeous nurse is pleading with you
you always seem to be dreaming this

4.
The saxophonist drops fifty-seven octaves
and harmonizes with the deepest
melody you've ever imagined
it levitates your subwoofer
the voice-over is from God

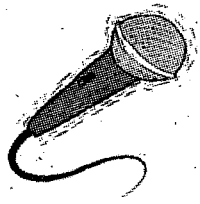
3.
Your toothpaste tube is pinched to
a thread and your toothpaste
forms a pure white bead
that streams to eternity
eternity bears a familiar logo





2.
A sleek SUV races toward you
the brakes almost scream
the road curves infinitely
the billboard may or may not read:
"drivers wanted, or not"

1.
In an unending talent show
you stand naked with mike
and hold the same B-flat
you began to utter
over two billion years ago



—Robert Frazier

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Jim Grimsley tells us, "I'm working on a novel that carries forward characters from a couple of my stories from *Asimov's,* "Into Greenwood" (September 2001) and "The 120 Hours of Sodom" (February 2005); I'm not incorporating those stories into the book, but I am following the characters out of the stories into the next phase of their lives. In May, I won an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in June I won a Lambda Award for my last novel, *The Ordinary.*" He returns to our pages with a philosophical look at what it means to be caught in the glare of the . . .

UNBENDING EYE

Jim Grimsley

Seeing Roger Dennis again at all was the surprise, much less finding him in a bar on Chartres Street that I visited nearly every evening. I had heard he was dead some time ago. As I remembered the story, he died suddenly in an emergency room in Canada after some kind of accident the details of which I had forgotten, having listened at the time with only a polite modicum of attention, since I had not kept up with Roger after college. Yet here he was in my neighborhood bar where I came most evenings after supper, where the bartender had already seen me enter and poured out my favorite armagnac.

There was no mistaking Roger for anyone else. When I had known him in college, he possessed a singular, odd beauty that drew others to him, the face of Helen but made masculine—pale blue eyes, dark hair, lips like ripe fruit. We had shared a couple of classes in New Testament Greek. For

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a while I studied vocabulary with him, and we debated pronunciation and drilled each other in the conjugation of present tense verbs. In appearance he had aged since then, but not in such a way as to change him much. So when I saw him sitting by the window on a stool I thought to myself, well, it must have been somebody else who died, because here he is.

I took my brandy to join him, of course, thinking nothing peculiar, only that I ought to remember who told me he was dead so that I could correct the misinformation. But when I approached, he looked up at me and registered a jolt of shock; then he composed himself and greeted me with a handshake. But I could see that my appearance had frightened him. We greeted each other and the fear passed, but after we had spoken a few moments he began to glance at the window and then suggested we move to the back of the bar, where there were a few stools in a shadowed corner. There he seemed more relaxed and we spoke pleasantly on ordinary topics—what we had done since school, when we had last seen each other, the pains we had shared translating passages from Paul's epistles. I sipped the armagnac and let my nostrils linger in the rich aroma while he mentioned that he was looking to get out of the country on a ship here in New Orleans but had not yet booked any passage. My family had any number of ships in port at the moment, some cargo vessels with room for a few passengers, and when I mentioned this, his eyes lit up and he nearly lunged toward me to take my arm. "I need to leave the country very quietly," he said, "can you help me do that?"

I assured him that no one was in a better position to offer such help than I, and at his deep relief I was struck by the strangeness of the situation—that here he was alive when I had heard otherwise, yes, very much alive but needing to exit the country in secret. "Of course I'll help you," I said, "but you've made me very curious. Not just this business." I waved my hand a bit, feeling the liquor, but instinctively I kept my voice low. "I heard you were dead years ago."

He stared into his glass and said nothing.

"You must admit that it's very curious. And now here you are, wanting to sail away without a trace. Unless it really wasn't you I heard about. Unless I'm mistaken, unless it was someone else."

Something narrowed in his gaze, as if he were coming suddenly to focus, all of him drawn to a point. When he looked into my eyes I felt the gaze so far inside me that I shivered. "No," he said, "it was me who died," and ordered another drink, and when it arrived he told me this story.

I will begin, he said, with the last scene I remember before I died: I was looking up from the emergency room examining table, listening to the doctor order a tomographic scan of my head, and somehow I knew, I must have heard, the fact that I had been injured. I had fallen down steps, crashing head first against a wall. I remember the fall only as a flash of something rushing toward me and a force on the top of my head. Nausea rushed through me in the emergency room and I felt my head pounding and my stomach heaved and someone propped me up and helped me to vomit and something split inside my skull and everything after that was hazy.

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I woke up in another room, lying with a sheet pulled over my face. The thought occurred to me that I might be dead, in a morgue, maybe, and I lay there for a long time while a square of sunlight moved slowly down my body. I lay still until the room began to get dark. Feeling as if I had been drugged. Near sundown, for some reason the thought occurred to me that I should try to move, and I found I could move and sat up and looked out the window. A view of pink light in the sky and the tops of some fir trees, more tops of trees stretching away on all sides. Hill country.

While I was lying under the sheet I had thought vaguely I would find myself in a hospital but now I saw quite clearly I was in some other kind of place. I was sitting on a hospital bed, it was true, and there was some monitoring equipment beside me. On either side of my bed, rolling screens blocked my view. I sat up and faced the window with the emptiness of the room behind me, all silence, a stillness that struck me as eerie. My head began to throb.

When I touched my head I remembered that I had fallen and hurt myself but at this point my head had been shaved and there was not a wound to be found on it. But still I had the pounding headache that was the last thing I remembered, so I lay down again and the throbbing subsided. At the back of my head something plucked at the fabric of the pillow and I touched the skin at the base of my skull—a small round hardness there, not a blood clot but plastic, it felt, like the cap on a catheter. Worrying at it with my finger, I lay quietly till my head stopped hurting and I could breathe calmly again.

Presently I smelled an odor in the room and slowly stood. Pervasive in the air, as if a gas had been discharged. The doors and windows appeared to have been carefully sealed; the room had never been designed as airtight, but someone had attempted to make it so. The throbbing surged in my head but not so fiercely this time, and soon subsided. A long narrow room, many beds, an aisle down the center, walls of a nondescript brown tile. As I have been all my life, I was conscious then of the need to remain calm, but for the first time, I reached a state of quietude without any effort, even as I surveyed the two rows of beds, maybe twenty in all.

The beds were all separated by rolling screens, and each was attended by the same type of monitoring equipment. On each of the beds lay a body, covered by the same sort of white sheet that I held to my waist at the moment. As I walked slowly down the center aisle, I could make out the peak of each nose cutting across each face. Perhaps, gazing at these bodies, I felt a bit colder, though only for a moment.

So I had been correct in my first impression. This was a morgue, apparently, since these people were all dead.

The nearest of the bodies was a woman, perhaps in her late twenties, naked as I was, head shaven like mine. Her body had no odor of decay, and she had died in rather good shape with no obvious wounds. She was well preserved. When I laid my fingers between her breasts, the moist cleavage yielded no trace of a heartbeat. The flesh was soft and slightly cool. I leaned close to her, and smelled a sweet aroma rising out of her, the same over her head as over her torso, her feet. As if she had been dipped in a bath.

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It occurred to me that she had died a beautiful woman. I say occurred to me because the thought did not enter naturally, as it would have in the past. I gazed down at this woman, took the sheet off her, to see all her nakedness at once. Feeling hardly anything at all.

Without hurry I examined all the bodies, uncovering their faces, their torsos, sometimes letting the sheet drop to the floor beside the bed. Once, when I noted that the sheet covering a particular body was completely white and clean, I exchanged it for my own, which was marred by several dull brown stains, perhaps old blood stains that had been laundered many times but nevertheless remained clearly visible. This left bare the fair-complexioned man whose grave I was, in a sense, robbing, his bronze fingers curled gracefully against his thigh, soft, the shadow like a Chinese ideogram. I felt nothing for this man, any more than I had for the lovely dead woman several beds away, and I was certain he no longer minded much of anything, including the fact that I wanted his sheet.

Nineteen bodies I counted, ten female and nine male. All appeared approximately the same age, which was approximately my age; all were in rather good physical condition, as I was; all had the same sweet smell, except me, who smelled his own ordinary body odor. All had shaven heads.

I would not say I was surprised by any of this, but there was one thing more. I chose a young woman. Whatever had been added to these bodies to preserve them in this way, with this light scent of roses, of jasmine, of honeysuckle, had left the flesh soft, if cool, and rendered the joints limber, so that it was easy to raise her head. I had expected some hindrance of rigor mortis and was relieved, though puzzled, for she was clearly dead, but it was as though she had died only a moment ago.

At the back of her head, just at the base of her skull but slightly off center, a neat square in blue had been tattooed onto the flesh and at the center of the square nested a small white cap. I could not remove the cap in the one easy tug I gave it, and to do more seemed morbid.

Replacing her head gently on the bed, I covered her with the sheet again, and then, because I hardly knew anything else to do, I replaced the sheets over all the bodies, till everything was just as it had been before. As I was finishing this task, I heard a door open, followed by the sound of a number of people entering. Overhead, rows of fluorescent lamps flooded the room with harsh light. Though I had been able to see perfectly well without it, every detail.

I turned unhurriedly to face the people who were waiting, drawing the sheet more closely around me, determined to make the best appearance possible. A group of men and women, dressed in dark suits or lab coats, approached me. Now one of them stepped forward, an older woman with a long, crooked nose, bad skin, a smell of too much powder, and she was raising her hands to greet me, to tell me what had happened to me, but I was tired already.

The doctors were very proud of their project, however, and so, after I had dressed in the awful clothes they offered me, they took me to a conference room with all the latest electronic equipment, including a projection screen that they could all write on at the same time, when they could

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get the electronic pens to work. Video-conferencing cameras in the four corners of the room, in case they should need to video conference with somebody, and microphones at each chair, small and round. So much extremely modern equipment housed in what looked like an old hospital from the forties, plaster walls and tile wainscoting, crank windows and steam radiator pipes. In the conference room they introduced themselves; there were, I learned, five doctors and four security people, as they termed themselves. Their chief, the woman who had spoken to me, introduced herself as Dr. Carla Lucas, and after we had been served coffee and sweet doughnuts, nearly inedible, she proceeded to deliver a brief lecture on the nature and purpose of this apparently dilapidated installation. Research into a means for suspending the effects of decay on recently-deceased bodies, an attempt to extend the viability of the organs for transplant or other use. The research was based on early success with the use of hyperoxigenated compounds injected into the corpses of laboratory animals just after death. This had led them to an unexpected bit of serendipity: certain laboratory mice when freshly dead and preserved in this way had actually come back to life when stimulated internally with an electrical charge. The viable percentage had increased dramatically when a preparation that included a massive number of fetal neural cells was injected directly into the brain of the dead mouse, and when the mouse's tissues were kept under one and one-half atmospheres of pressure in a mix of gases more rich in oxygen than the usual.

I endeavored to listen to the details but could not for the life of me take my eyes off the doctors, all of whom were dressed in quite shabby clothes, tattered sleeves, and worn elbows, holes in the soles of their shoes. The security people were also wearing really awful outfits, some sort of blend of fabrics that ballooned out stiffly from the thighs, like jodhpurs. The doctors were endeavoring to convince me that this research was being conducted by some branch of our Canadian government and the security people were agreeing with this, but I had great difficulty believing that federal officials could be so badly dressed. They looked as though they had all been hired by the local school board.

I should try to remember all of what they told me in this conference room because I have a feeling it was important, but for the life of me, little of it made any impression on me whatsoever. I understood that they were very excited by the fact that I was walking around, breathing, and that they meant to do a lot of tests on me to make sure my body was functioning as it had before I died.

Dr. Lucas flashed on the screen a diagram of the human skull, and her hand hung slackly at the point at the base of the skull labeled, "Point Alpha," with some attempt at grandeur. The researchers had injected their neural stew into this point, and this had apparently jump-started the brain—my brain, she meant—while at another insertion at Point Beta, into a vein in the chest near the heart, they injected a small, ingeniously devised matrix of electrically charged proteins, a kind of organic lightning bolt, she said (and had said this phrase many times before, I intuited, from her pleased expression). This biological battery was designed to lodge along the heart wall and send electrical pulses through the muscle,

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stimulating the heart to beat. As it had done, in my case. There was more, but I was never good with very many polysyllables at once.

At a certain point the lecture stopped and they waited for something. I studied Point Alpha carefully, no less expectant than they. After a moment, Dr. Lucas asked, "Do you have any questions, Mr. Dennis?"

They had been waiting for me. To show some interest. Smiling politely, I shook my head. "No."

The doctors all seemed mildly surprised, and the security people appeared particularly put out. Dr. Lucas, however, gave me a patient, motherly look. As a scientist, she could afford to be generous to me, a layman. "You have understood everything, just as I have explained?"

"Yes, you've been very clear."

She adjusted her reading glasses. "I'm glad to hear it. I was afraid my explanation was too technical."

Simply to reassure her, I said, "Oh no, you've been so helpful." I was sitting at the conference table, trying to appear cheerful, but they were all watching me as if I were saying something wrong. "I suppose I do have one question. How long has it been since I died?"

Dr. Lucas consulted with one of her colleagues, a man named Potter with a lot of papers and a palm computer, who needed someone to repeat my name to him, and I heard it, my name, with such a curious detachment. "Roger Dennis." After some checking he was able to announce, with complete satisfaction, that I had been dead about two years, preserved by the hyperoxigenated refrigerant and held in a hyperbaric chamber till the recent procedure had been performed, the various injections in the oxygen-rich gas, which had proven so successful.

"We can't preserve a body much longer than two years, even with the gamma serum," Dr. Potter continued, "so it was a good thing for you we were ready."

"I was getting a little ripe, was I?"

He tittered nervously, and they all looked at one another, as if they wanted to laugh but were uncertain.

Dr. Lucas still smiled at me, but I detected a rising level of discomfort in her stiff expression. "I must say, I find your reaction to all this to be very unexpected."

"My reaction?"

"You hardly show any surprise at all. And yet you're alive again, after dying."

"Well, I don't remember much about being dead."

They laughed a bit at that, then the room got silent. Dr. Lucas was still watching me. To console herself, she entered into another long explanation, about the need for further tests, for, as it turned out, they were puzzled by the fact that I was the only one of the twenty dead people to wake up. "Dead subjects," as she termed them. So many more tests would be needed on me, and on the failures as well, and she hoped I would be willing to undergo them. "We have a mission, now that we know our technique can be successful. We need to know why it is that you've come back to life, the only one of twenty."

"But have I come back to that?" I asked.

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Poor dears, all puzzled again. I should not have been so smug, I suppose; it would haunt me later.

"Back to what?" Dr. Lucas asked.

"To life. I only mean to ask if you're sure that's what this is."

My question hardly ruffled them, I think, though it would echo for a while. The philosophical underpinnings of our situation never interested them, that I could detect, then or later. We were finished with the briefing, I could go. One of the doctors conducted me to my rooms, which were actually rather pleasant, if nondescript. A small bedroom adjoined a small sitting room, with a bathroom tucked between. Windows with old fashioned, and rather yellowed, venetian blinds. Clean down to the last corner, a state so conspicuous I wondered if they were worried I might be susceptible to bacteria or contagion, me in my freshly dead state. Or post-dead, rather.

Dr. Potter stopped by to suggest that I rest, as in the morning I would be having several imaging studies, under the supervision of Dr. Lucas herself. He asked me some questions, took my vital signs, noted the strength of my reflexes, all the while making neat notations into his computer. Dr. Potter expressed his hope that I understood the importance of the work in which he and his colleagues were engaged.

"I believe I am engaged in it, too," I said.

"What? You are, of course, you are. And you play the most vital role of all. One might say that, even."

"I believe you could say that."

He lingered another moment and finally came to the point. "Do you remember your past life? Do you know who you were?"

"I was—I suppose I am—Roger Dennis, a systems analyst for a small software company in Montreal. Is that right? I could tell you some of my memories but I doubt you would know whether they're correct or not."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't."

"Then I don't understand your question."

"I was simply curious because you've expressed no interest in any of that. Your life. Your family."

"But I'm dead, as far as they're concerned."

"Yes."

I turned away from him, lay on the bed. "Then I really don't see the point." And I didn't. I felt nothing. Not for my mother, my sisters, the woman I had been dating. It was as if the memories had grayed.

Dr. Potter retired soon after, when the old man Farley came with my dinner. Setting the tray on a table in the living room, nodding to the security guard posted at my door, Farley showed his name badge (for what, I don't know) but refused to look me in the eye. I suppose he knew I had been dead and was uncomfortable about it. Not a scientist, I guessed, but someone rather ordinary, though he had remarkable blue eyes and shaggy, heavy brows hanging over them.

The meal appeared to have been prepared carefully, but I found I had no taste for it at all until the hot foods cooled. Even then I could not stomach the small beef steak. I ate the leafy salad and the over-boiled broccoli. Presently the old man came to take the plate away, still refusing to look

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at me, snatching the tray and scurrying away, and I wished, vaguely, for a pair of fangs to wear the next time he came in.

Needing no rest, I went for a walk. I wondered if the security person would try to hinder me but she simply fell in beside me. Her presence proved no bother at all, since she said not one word. I was delighted that we might thus avoid all personal tedium and we explored this post of scientific progress as thoroughly as I was allowed, even leaving the building, at one point, to stroll in a courtyard, the moon over the wall, razor wire thrown into silhouette.

The fresh air smelled wonderful and I remarked on it. The security woman said she liked to get out, and I smiled. The stars were fierce. One would have thought that, once outside, my curiosity would have led me to examine the exterior of what had evidently become my prison; but it was only the stars that I cared to watch. Fascinating, thousand upon thousand, teeming, dense, white-hot light drifting from such incomprehensible distances, a particle of light bound all the way from a star into my eye. Pouring untroubled through all that emptiness. I felt something familiar, standing there, gazing upward. Some shiver of feeling passed through me, an echoing loneliness.

I asked the security woman to lead me back to the rooms then, and she did, and I lay in bed all night, staring upward in the dark.

As it happened, those first examinations stretched into some months. I doubt any human body has ever been better mapped, unless it be one of the virgins of the *120 Days of Sodom*. The staff of the installation was not large but there must have been forty or fifty people on site. They were all bright, earnest people who dressed very badly, and after a time I came to the conclusion that they were engaged in the search for something almost out of habit, as if this project had been funded once, a long time ago, and continued because nobody had asked about it since. Most of the people here were doctors but I was never sure which of them were medical doctors, though I did soon enough recognize Dr. Stewart as a neurosurgeon by his arrogance and haughty treatment of his peers.

There were certainly enough of them that their complete attention on my limited number of molecules soon proved irksome. I was scanned in a magnet and under radiation, by positron emission, by sound wave; I swallowed radioactive dyes and endured other kinds of contrast imaging studies, the whole panoply available right there in the complex. My image was reconstructed in three dimensions in the various computers in the various rooms and I would lie there, watching the iodine-stained image of my heart beating, the slight ischemic defect in one of the walls, present since I was a child, from a time when I nearly drowned and had to be revived by cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Even granted that some of the equipment appeared outdated, the array of toys these fellows had was impressive. The imaging studies proved only that my body had apparently taken on its normal human functioning once again, in spite of the fact that I had suffered a brain concussion and death and had been preserved by means of something called gamma serum, followed by refrigeration for nearly two years.

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When I chafed at all this attention, however, I did note that my fate was superior to that of the nineteen corpses who had failed to resurrect, all of whom were undergoing the most extensive autopsies imaginable, under supervision of a team of pathologists led by Dr. Shiraz.

They were looking in the wrong place, and I already suspected the truth, but I had no reason to say so. I no longer felt present in a living world, I felt I had settled into something else. This proved more than an illusion. Nothing they did hurt me in the least, or caused me the slightest discomfort, not when they sampled liver or lung tissue, not when they cored my bone for marrow. I said nothing. If offered a painkiller I took it, but I felt nothing from it, except a temporary sense of concealment.

At night, in my small suite, I lay on the bed watching the shadowed ceiling. No longer sleeping, though I only revealed this to the doctors when they were performing their sleep studies. Had I always been an insomniac? No, I had never had any trouble of that kind. But my medical records, which they had apparently obtained, indicated that I had asked for sleeping pills on several occasions from my primary care doctor. Because I liked to take sleeping pills, I said. Very pleasant.

They gave me more sleeping pills. They gave me injections. They could knock me unconscious, they learned. But they could not put me to sleep.

This caused some consternation, particularly for the neurologist Dr. Shabahrahmi, who performed various scans of my brain, some lasting for hours, to determine exactly what type of brain-wave activity I had when unconscious. He found nothing determinate, except that I never slept.

I often rested, however, lying in the bed dressed as if I were sleeping, staring up at the darkness, at the ceiling, at whatever was there.

At the end of these first examinations, nothing had been determined that could differentiate me from my dissected fellow specimens, except that I had, for some reason, gotten up from bed when I was supposed to, and the others had not. The mystery had, in fact, deepened, since it was clear that, along with rising from the dead, I had undergone some kind of change. I had lost the need for sleep. But these learned people could not determine why.

I had lost other appetites, and these were duly noted and, in the secondary phase of their study of me, tests were performed on these missing appetites as well. I had asked that the dietitian no longer allow the old man to serve me any meat, and, after a while, I lost all appetite for cooked food. I ate fresh fruits and vegetables. The doctors tested me by feeding me meat, which I would promptly vomit up, and they would scurry to do tests on the vomit, to determine what type of stomach acid was present in it, and to look at my stomach, to see if they could learn why my stomach was suddenly rejecting this food. But again, the tests showed no conclusive results, vomit that was like anybody's vomit, feces that was like anybody's feces, nothing to lead them anywhere, only the fact that I had changed in some way, for some reason that eluded them.

It was suggested that my change in eating habits might be the result of some psychological changes, and that these might require study, but there were no psychiatrists or psychologists on the staff of the project,

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and these branches of science were not held in high regard. Those ideas were never pursued.

A week or so passed during which no tests were conducted and nearly all my time was my own. I remember speculating that perhaps they were abandoning this line of research and would set me free. Looking back on that now, it seems such an innocent thought, particularly for a man who had already died once and ought to know better. But a certain innocence still remained to me. I was aware that many discussions were going on around me during this quiet interlude, but I ignored them. With hours to myself, I sat for long intervals in the courtyard at night, staring up at the stars, watching them wheel slowly overhead. Gazing upward into the face of something cold and unknowable.

Dr. Lucas called me to her office at the end of the week, and the security guard, Taquanda, the same woman as on my first day, escorted me to her. They had kept up the practice of the continuous security escort and guard for my quarters though I had never shown the least inclination to escape, so I had gotten to know some of my guardians by name. Dr, Lucas beckoned me inside and closed the door. She always did her makeup very badly, sloppy lipstick and crooked mascara, and today was wearing something awful, a knit dress that clung to her lumpish body in all the wrong places; she seemed even more hideous than if she had been naked, so that the interview was conducted, on my part, in a state of horror, as though I were conversing with Grendel's mother. "Can you guess why I've called you here tonight?"

"I suppose I could try. You've been reassessing your results this past week and there's been a lot of disagreement as to what you ought to do next. But now you've come to some decision."

"Yes, we have." She patted her hair, drab, thin stuff, no shape. At that moment, I understood I would never be going home. Something about the indifference of her ugliness, none of the gentle peace of homeliness. "We'll be taking another line of research starting tomorrow."

I accepted the information without any show of interest, and she waited, and finally said, "You really aren't at all curious about what we're going to do, are you?"

"You're not going to let me go?"

"No, of course not."

I shrugged. "Then the answer is, no, I'm not curious as to what you're going to do."

She appeared startled by my statements and leaned back in her chair, tapping that crooked nose with a sharp fingertip. "We can't let you go, unfortunately, you're our only hope."

"To bring back more people like me. From the dead."

"Surely you understand the value of what we're doing."

I gave no sign that I understood anything at all, and finally, exasperated, she began to clean her eyeglasses with fierce little motions of her hands. "Well, I don't have anything more to say than that. We'll be trying another line of research starting tomorrow. I wish you the best of luck."

"You do?"

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"Yes, of course I do." She spoke vehemently, as though I had challenged her humanity on some consequential ground.

"Well, then, I assume I'll need it," I said, and left her office and went back to my rooms.

I ate my dinner, an apple and two bananas, some orange slices, raw carrots, even a raw potato, which was good to keep and nibble. I have no idea which of the fruits or vegetables contained the preparation called Serum Omega, the composition of which no one ever discussed with me, since they were ashamed of its existence. I understood from the strange sensation, the tingling, in all my limbs, that perhaps the doctors were beginning their work earlier than announced. I who had not needed sleep in all these months felt a slow lethargy seep through me, my limbs heavy. What kind of poison kills the body but does not damage it? They came for me before I had completely lost consciousness, lost life, but by then I was paralyzed, and simply felt them stirring around me, dragging me onto a stretcher, wheeling me down the dull tiled corridor. The last thing I remember, in a room that seemed suddenly familiar, was a tingling at the base of my skull, where the little cap had waited, all this time, in case it should be needed again.

This time I surfaced in a glare. A light hung just above me, a fierce, round light, and I could not see so much as feel, and the light was not so much a brightness as an insistent gaze transfixing me from a distance infinitely remote from me, out where existence is the only thing there is, out there so far away. . . .

A dream? I never woke from it, I surfaced inside it, not as if I were waking but rather descending from a height. I became aware of where my body was and then I was inside it, but the distance seemed greater than before. I was aware of the room, the same clerestory windows, the square of sunlight traveling along the sheet that covered me. Not the same sheet, this one snow white. As before, still bodies lay in the beds on either side of me and along the opposite wall. The motionless sheets shone faintly white, and the sweet smell was almost more than I could bear. I quickly checked the bodies as before, and this time I found one of them breathing, not strong enough to pull the sheet down from her face, but breathing nevertheless, so I pulled it down, and, as I bent over, she looked at me with a complete coldness, utter contempt. She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

She continued to breathe for a while, long enough for the doctors to arrive. They were excited, of course, and rushed her off to revive her further, if they could, though by the time they wrestled her onto a stretcher her breathing was already slowing. She died, or faded, a few minutes later, just down the hall.

While they were studying her they left me alone, except to draw blood and samples of other tissue; her they dissected, sampling her in every way possible, with every type of biopsy pincer and core needle, till at the end of their studies her body was completely exploded into ten thousand pieces, all preserved in formaldehyde in offices up and down the corridors. I used to wonder what pieces of tissue floating in cloudy jars were

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her, in the later weeks, after they could derive no more pleasure in carving her up into even smaller slices, or mounting slices of her onto slides. Within weeks they returned their attention to me.

They studied me again, all the same tests, some even more invasive and uncomfortable than the first battery. At times they looked at me as if they wanted to cut me apart too, but they were afraid to do it. The cycle of tests went on and on, till again it stopped for a few days, and I waited.

One night in my room I felt the drowsiness run through all my limbs, unnatural to me by that point, since I had not slept in many months; so I knew I was to die again.

Same as before, a burning gaze above me, all I can remember of that time, or place, or whatever it might be called, between my death and wakening again. I lay beneath a fierce eye examining me every moment, and I longed to be removed from its gaze, but I could only lie there while it watched me, ceaselessly . . .

I woke in the same room as before. For the third time I examined rows of bodies. This time no one had responded to any of the serums or gases, only me. The arrival of the doctors was delayed, as it had been each time, and only now did I become in the least curious that they should leave me alone for so long with these dead ones, this sweet smell in the air. From the expressions of Dr. Lucas and Dr. Potter it was clear they understood they had failed again, and now when they looked at me I could only wonder what lay in store.

For a few days I was left in peace. Then Dr. Lucas called me to her office, and I followed with the escort she had sent, into her sitting room with the old fashioned crank windows, partly rusted near the top. Like the office of some elementary school principal, the room was decorated with darkly stained wooden furniture, slatted blinds with frayed cords, pipes running ceiling to floor, a steam convector under the window. She was sitting in this office, dressed more tastefully this time, a dark, high-waisted dress that helped mask her lack of discernible shape, even a pair of what were called ear-bobs in my mother's day, white and round and big. A touch of lipstick. Feeling quite honored by the care with which she had done her toilet, I took my seat on the long, wide sofa. Straightening a place for myself in the twists of the chenille throw, I wondered in an offhand way whether I should be prepared to die tonight, and after a moment while she finished some notation or other in some computer file or other, I stated, "So I expect you are preparing another phase of tests."

She lifted a finger to signal that I should wait, tapped the keyboard intently for another few moments, closed the lid of the notebook, the whine of the drive dying away. "Please excuse me. Yes, we have been discussing our next phases." She sagged in the chair, clearly exhausted. "We're puzzled more and more by our repeated failures in the aftermath of our one complete success. You, I mean."

"How many more times do you think you can bring me back?"

She looked at me quite oddly, quite fixedly. "I really don't know."

"But you'll keep on till I fail, too."

Her jaw set itself into a strong line. "We'll keep on until we can under-

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stand what is happening in your body that isn't happening with the others. We'll keep on until we succeed."

I must have looked skeptical, for she continued. "We're close, and we know it. The discoveries we've already made are remarkable, really. Tricks even the Egyptians never learned about the preservation of tissue, even its healing after death, as in the case of your brain injury."

"The first time I died, you mean."

"Yes." She waited for a while, then asked, "You don't have anything to say?"

"A question, perhaps."

She leaned forward, as if this were some turning point in our relations. "Go ahead."

"How long was I dead? The first time, I mean. Before your treatment to preserve me."

"We had to give you the first infusion of hyperox before you were taken off life support."

"Before."

"Yes."

I smiled. "You must have a very efficient system for collecting subjects. To find the right kind of dead people, so quickly."

"We had a number of hospitals helping us with the initial part of the study, the part that related to the preservation of organs for re-use. The other portion of our research is confidential. For obvious reasons."

"So when I fell and hit my head, someone called your people as soon as I died. Or just before I died."

"Something like that." She seemed perplexed, then irritated. "Are you implying some sort of impropriety? We aren't killing anyone. We didn't steal your body out of a morgue. Your own next of kin gave us permission to use you in the research. I can show you all the paperwork if you like."

"That won't be necessary," I said. "How many more of me do you have? In the refrigerator, I mean. How long can you go on?"

She set her mouth in a line. "What we're doing here could be of benefit to billions of people."

"Of course it could." I sighed. "That's all. I only had those questions."

She thought about that for a moment. Relaxed, when my tone changed. "I suppose I had expected you to ask about your freedom."

I laughed, and turned away from her, and laughed again.

She gave me the most chilling look, and I wondered if they had already administered the killing specific, if she had brought me to the office to watch me die this time, to witness the exact moment of my passing.

"When I'm dead," I told her, "before you bring me out of it. There's someone watching me."

She moved her head just slightly. I believe she considered that I might have become unstable in some way, and so I stood and waited in the doorway for a moment.

"Who do you think it is?" she asked.

"I don't know. But it strikes me that maybe someone is there, sending me back to you, over and over again. Keeping me there for a while and then sending me back. Only me."

"Why?"

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I shrugged.

But she had heard what I said, and judging by her expression, a vision of the place I was describing arose in her head at that moment, a place in which she was lying suspended in darkness from all sides, darkness and cool air, and above a light, a piercing eye gazing into the center of her. I believe she saw this as I had, hanging in that endless expanse, the feeling of a presence, the unbelievably fierce awareness. She had a look of awe, a whiteness to the eyes, a face of glass, and I said good night to her and she whispered goodnight to me as Taquanda took me back to my room.

One more time they killed me and I woke under the eye, with the wind of that place scouring through me and the searching of that eye above me, never blinking or moving. A voice in my head, not words, only the voice, notes like music, and then my body closed around me like wet clay and I was lying in the room, alone this time, no other corpses to keep me company. Though perhaps somewhere else, in some other room, two rows of beds, faces under white sheets, a sweet smell in the air. Perhaps the doctors had decided to spare me their failures, at least.

The routine had become settled by now, and that first night when I was alive again, or what they called alive, I was allowed to be on my own while the doctors assessed whatever data they had collected during the resurrection. Since I had always been docile, even inert, the security people had become a bit lax, and the security person with me that night was one of those who had fallen under the influence of Farley the cook, who thought me some sort of monster. She hung back from me when I went for a walk and that provided the avenue of escape I needed. By then I knew the layout of the installation fully, and so I lured her into a part of the building that was sparsely inhabited and I strangled her there.

Curious, that I killed her. I had no plan to do anything of the kind, I meant only to immobilize her in some way, maybe knock her out, but instead I put my bare hands around her neck and squeezed with such force that she was quickly gone, despite some struggles to free herself. I let her drop to the floor and turned away. Let them revive her, I thought.

I escaped the place through the kitchen, where Farley was puttering, whistling something rather tuneless, "Waltzing Matilda," I think; and for a moment I wanted to kill him, too, but I decided it was better to let him go on humming, so that when the doctors learned of my escape he could swear that he had been in the kitchen the whole time, getting their dinner ready, and he hadn't seen me. I slid through the pantry, out the delivery door, and headed into the woods at the edge of the parking lot.

The rest is tedious. I stole a car, I stole some money. I crossed the border into the United States on foot and stole another car and more money. I avoided any more killing though the thought often occurred to me on my journey. I have driven the long way here. Though I am certain there are people trying to find me, people who already know where I've come. So I need to get on a ship going south, to where the sun beats down more strongly from the center of the sky.

When his story began I found it fantastic, but troublesome, and as he continued with it, I myself became quite uncomfortable in the noisy bar.

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So we interrupted the story to walk to my apartment in the Pontalba Building, and he finished the telling of it in my parlor, with the casement windows open and the breezes stirring from the front gallery. He sat there with his white hands in his lap. I knew he expected some response, but I had nothing to offer, the story itself was so astounding.

"You can't really believe me, of course," he said, after a moment, "but that doesn't matter, as long as you help me."

"Of course I'll help you," I said, "first thing in the morning. We have a ship leaving for Caracas, and I'll get you on that."

He seemed very moved by this, settled back into his comfortable chair. I thought he might fall asleep but remembered his story and watched, and he never more than blinked his eyes.

I led him back to my room, helped him to undress, lay him on the bed, undressed myself and laid down beside him. I watched him all night, his good body, his firm jaw, his face that I had remembered from so long ago. We simply lay there, side by side, and I knew I would remember that night, maybe wish we had made love to one another, wish I had tested whether there was any warmth in him at all. To be able to say later that I had made love to a dead man, or a ghost. He never closed his eyes that I saw, though I drifted off myself, in the wee hours. When I woke the next morning he was lying exactly in the same position, gazing upward at the ceiling, high and shadowed, a place into which only he could see.

The captain of the *Sylvia Moon* did not much like my insistence in the morning when I called him, but he finally saw the wisdom of acceding to my wishes when he remembered who I was, or, rather, who my family was. My friend Roger Dennis set sail immediately for the northern coast of South America.

I had no more idea then than I do now of what to make of his story. Some people did come looking for him and landed eventually at the office of my family's shipping concern; they were persistent and remained in New Orleans for some days, but they were not able to penetrate through all the veils of the company to me, and therefore I can only speculate as to who they were. But I made certain they learned nothing of the *Sylvia Moon* or its passenger.

My caution was unnecessary, however. Roger Dennis never landed at any port. The ship's captain later told me, with some fear for his future, I expect, that as the ship was crossing the Caribbean, Roger leapt overboard one noon and drowned. His body was not recovered. The crew gave him a burial service at sea, my captain said, and since I alone knew who he was, could I please notify his family? I promised I would take whatever steps were necessary, and I did make a trip to Ontario, though naturally I saw nothing at all of his family. I checked the records of the hospital at which Roger told me he had died, and after various referrals was able to confirm his original death. Roger Dennis had perished of head trauma after a fall nearly five years before. As if the paper assurance were not enough, I made a trip to a cemetery near Montreal, where my uncertainty finally increased to the point that I could credit him what he had claimed. I can believe his story was true, so far as he himself knew the truth, now that I have seen his grave. ○

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IT'S NOT EASY BEING DEAD

After Kermit the Frog

It's not that easy being dead,
having to spend each day buried underground.
When I think it could be nicer being alive
And much more interesting like that.

It's not easy being dead.
You blend in with so many inanimate things.
And people tend to pass you over 'cause you're
Not standing up and talking back
Like others of their kind.

But dead is a natural way to be.
It's so cozy and serene.
And dead can be safe like a harbor
And forever like the sea.

When dead is all there is to be,
You could wonder way, but why wonder why?
I'm dead and it will do just fine,
Someday for you as well as me.

—Bruce Boston

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Bruce McAllister has recently sold stories to *Glimmer Train, Aeon Speculative Fiction,* and *F&SF*. He's working on a novel tentatively called *Emilio and the Water Dragons of Como* and on a screenplay version (with former student/close friend/TV and film writer Michael Ajakwe) of his classic SF book, *Dream Baby*. As a teenager, Bruce corresponded with legendary *Analog* illustrator John Schoenherr. Bruce was certain that he, too, would someday be an SF magazine illustrator, but Schoenherr told him, "You're crazy, Bruce. Illustration, but it's a very iffy life; if you can write, for God's sake write instead!" The writing life has been rewarding, but Bruce was thrilled when he learned that this month's cover would go to his compelling and evocative tale of what it truly means to be . . .

KIN

Bruce McAllister

The alien and the boy, who was twelve, sat in the windowless room high above the city that afternoon. The boy talked and the alien listened.

The boy was ordinary—the genes of three continents in his features, his clothes cut in the style of all boys in the vast housing project called LAX. The alien was something else, awful to behold; and though the boy knew it was rude, he did not look up as he talked.

He wanted the alien to kill a man, he said. It was that simple.

As the boy spoke, the alien sat upright and still on the one piece of furniture that could hold him. Eyes averted, the boy sat on the stool, the one by the terminal where he did his schoolwork each day. It made him uneasy that the alien was on his bed, though he understood why. It made him uneasy that the creature's strange knee was so near his in the tiny room, and he was glad when the creature, as if aware, too, shifted its leg away.

He did not have to look up to see the Antalou's features. That one

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glance in the doorway had been enough, and it came back to him whether he wanted it to or not. It was not that he was scared, the boy told himself. It was just the idea—that such a thing could stand in a doorway built for humans, in a human housing project where generations had been born and died, and probably would forever. It did not seem possible.

He wondered how it seemed to the Antalou.

Closing his eyes, the boy could see the black synthetic skin the alien wore as protection against alien atmospheres. Under that suit, ropes of muscles and tendons coiled and uncoiled, rippling even when the alien was still. In the doorway the long neck had not been extended, but he knew what it could do. When it telescoped forward—as it could instantly—the head tipped up in reflex and the jaws opened.

Nor had the long talons—which the boy knew sat in the claws and even along the elbows and toes—been unsheathed. But he imagined them sheathing and unsheathing as he explained what he wanted, his eyes on the floor.

When the alien finally spoke, the voice was inhuman—filtered through the translating mesh that covered half its face. The face came back: The tremendous skull, the immense eyes that could see so many kinds of light and make their way in nearly every kind of darkness. The heavy welts—the auxiliary gills—inside the breathing globe. The dripping ducts below them, ready to release their jets of acid.

"Who is it . . . that you wish to have killed?" the voice asked, and the boy almost looked up. It was only a voice—mechanical, snake-like, halting—he reminded himself. By itself it could not kill him.

"A man named James Ortega-Mambay," the boy answered.

"Why?" The word hissed in the stale apartment air.

"He is going to kill my sister."

"You know this . . . how?"

"I just do."

The alien said nothing, and the boy heard the long, whispering pull of its lungs.

"Why," it said at last, "did you think . . . I would agree to it?"

The boy was slow to answer.

"Because you're a killer."

The alien was again silent.

"So all Antalou," the voice grated, "are professional killers?"

"Oh, no," the boy said, looking up and trying not to look away. "I mean. . . ."

"If not . . . then how . . . did you choose me?"

The boy had walked up to the creature at the great fountain by the Cliffs of Monica—a landmark any visitor to Earth would take in, if only because it appeared on the sanctioned itineraries—and had handed him a written message in crude Antalouan. "I know what you are and what you do," the message read. "I need your services. LAX cell 873-2345-2657 at 1100 tomorrow morning. I am Kim."

"Antalou are well known for their skills, sir," the boy said respectfully. "We've read about the Noh campaign, and what happened on Hoggun II when your people were betrayed, and what one company of your mercenaries were able to do against the Gar-Betties." The boy paused. "I had to

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give out ninety-eight notes, sir, before I found you. You were the only one who answered. . . ."

The hideous head tilted while the long arms remained perfectly still, and the boy found he could not take his eyes from them.

"I see," the alien said.

It was translator's idiom only. "Seeing" was not the same as "understanding." The young human had done what the military and civilian intelligence services of five worlds had been unable to do—identify him as a professional—and it made the alien reflect: Why had he answered the message? Why had he taken it seriously? A human child had delivered it, after all. Was it that he had sensed no danger and simply followed professional reflex, or something else? Somehow the boy had known he would. How?

"How much . . ." the alien said, curious, "are you able to pay?"

"I've got two hundred dollars, sir."

"How . . . did you acquire them?"

"I sold things," the boy said quickly.

The rooms here were bare. Clearly the boy had nothing to sell. He had stolen the money, the alien was sure.

"I can get more. I can—"

The alien made a sound that did not translate. The boy jumped.

The alien was thinking of the 200,000 inters for the vengeance assassination on Hoggun's third moon, the one hundred kilobucks for the renegade contract on the asteroid called Wolfe, and the mineral shares, pharmaceuticals, and spacelock craft—worth twice that—which he had in the end received for the three corporate kills on Alama Poy. What could two hundred *dollars* buy? Could it even buy a city rail ticket?

"That is not enough," the alien said. "Of course," it added, one arm twitching, then still again, "you may have thought to record . . . our discussion . . . and you may threaten to release the recording . . . to Earth authorities . . . if I do not do what you ask of me. . . ."

The boy's pupils dilated then—like those of the human province official on Diedor, the one he had removed for the Gray Infra there.

"Oh, no—" the boy stammered. "I wouldn't do that—" The skin of his face had turned red, the alien saw. "I didn't even think of it."

"Perhaps . . . you should have," the alien said. The arm twitched again, and the boy saw that it was smaller than the others, crooked but strong.

The boy nodded. Yes, he should have thought of that. "Why . . ." the alien asked then, "does a man named . . . James Ortega-Mambay . . . wish to kill your sister?"

When the boy was finished explaining, the alien stared at him again and the boy grew uncomfortable. Then the creature rose, joints falling into place with popping and sucking sounds, legs locking to lift the heavy torso and head, the long arms snaking out as if with a life of their own.

The boy was up and stepping back.

"Two hundred . . . is not enough for a kill," the alien said, and was gone, taking the same subterranean path out of the building which the boy had worked out for him.

* * *

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When the man named Ortega-Mambay stepped from the bullet elevator to the roof of the federal building, it was sunset and the end of another long but productive day at BuPopCon. In the sun's final rays the helipad glowed like a perfect little pond—not the chaos of the Pacific Ocean in the distance—and even the mugginess couldn't ruin the scene. It was, yes, the kind of weather one conventionally took one's jacket off in; but there was only one place to remove one's jacket with at least a modicum of dignity, and that was, of course, in the privacy of one's own FabHome-by-the-Sea. To thwart convention, he was wearing his new triple-weave "gauze" jacket in the pattern called "Summer Shimmer"—handsome, odorless, waterproof, and cool. He would not remove it until he wished to.

He was the last, as always, to leave the Bureau, and as always he felt the pride. There was nothing sweeter than being the last—than lifting off from the empty pad with the rotor blades singing over him and the setting sun below as he made his way in his earned solitude away from the city up the coast to another, smaller helipad and his FabHome near Oxnard. He had worked hard for such sweetness, he reminded himself.

His heli sat glowing in the sun's last light—part of the perfect scene—and he took his time walking to it. It was worth a paintbrush painting, or a digital one, or a multimedia poem. Perhaps he would make something to memorialize it this weekend, after the other members of his triad visited for their intimacy session.

As he reached the pilot's side and the little door there, a shadow separated itself from the greater shadow cast by the craft, and he nearly screamed.

The figure was tall and at first he thought it was a costume, a joke played by a colleague, nothing worse.

But as the figure stepped into the fading light, he saw what it was and nearly screamed again. He had seen such creatures in newscasts, of course, and even at a distance at the shuttleport or at major tourist landmarks in the city, but never like this. *So close*.

When it spoke, the voice was low and mechanical—the work of an Ipoor mesh.

"You are," the alien said, "James Ortega-Mambay . . . Seventh District Supervisor . . . BuPopCon?"

Ortega-Mambay considered denying it, but did not. He knew the reputation of the Antalou as well as anyone did. He knew the uses to which his own race, not to mention the other four races mankind had met among the stars, had put them. The Antalou did not strike him as creatures one lied to without risk.

"Yes. . . . I am. I am Ortega-Mambay."

"My own name," the Antalou said, "does not matter, Ortega-Mambay. You know what I am. . . . What matters . . . is that you have decreed . . . the pregnancy of Linda Tuckey-Yatsen illegal. . . . You have ordered the unborn female sibling . . . of the boy Kim Tuckey-Yatsen . . . aborted. Is this true?"

The alien waited.

"It may be," the man said, fumbling. "I certainly do not have all of our cases memorized. We do not process them by family name—"

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He stopped as he saw the absurdity of it. It was outrageous.

"I really do not see what business this is of yours," he began. "This is a Terran city, and an overpopulated one—in an overpopulated nation on a overpopulated planet that cannot afford to pay to move its burden off-world. We are faced with a problem and one we are quite happy solving by ourselves. None of this can possibly be any of your affair, Visitor. Do you have standing with your delegation in this city?"

"I do not," the mesh answered, "and it is indeed . . . my affair if . . . the unborn female child of Family Tuckey-Yatsen dies."

"I do not know what you mean."

"She is to live, Ortega-Mambay . . . Her brother wishes a sibling. . . . He lives and schools . . . in three small rooms while his parents work . . . somewhere in the city. . . . To him . . . the female child his mother carries . . . is already born. He has great feeling for her . . . in the way of your kind, Ortega-Mambay."

This could not be happening, Ortega-Mambay told himself. It was insane, and he could feel rising within him a rage he hadn't felt since his first job with the government. "How dare you!" he heard himself say. "You are standing on the home planet of another race and ordering me, a federal official, to obey not only a child's wishes, but your own—you, a Visitor and one without official standing among your own kind—"

"The child," the alien broke in, "will not die. If she dies, I will . . . do what I have been . . . retained to do."

The alien stepped then to the heli and the man's side, so close they were almost touching. The man did not back up. He would not be intimidated. *He would not.*

The alien raised two of its four arms, and the man heard a snicking sound, then a pop, then another, and something caught in his throat as he watched talons longer and straighter than anything he had ever dreamed of slip one by one through the creature's black syntheskin.

Then, using these talons, the creature removed the door from his heli.

One moment the alloy door was on its hinges; the next it was impaled on the talons, which were, Ortega-Mambay saw now, so much stronger than any nail, bone or other integument of Terran fauna. Giddily he wondered what the creature possibly ate to make them so strong.

"Get into your vehicle, Ortega-Mambay," the alien said. "Proceed home. Sleep and think . . . about what you must do . . . to keep the female sibling alive."

Ortega-Mambay could barely work his legs. He was trying to get into the heli, but couldn't, and for a terrible moment it occurred to him that the alien might try to help him in. But then he was in at last, hands flailing at the dashboard as he tried to do what he'd been asked to do: *Think.*

The alien did not sit on the bed, but remained in the doorway. The boy did not have trouble looking at him this time.

"You know more about us," the alien said suddenly, severely, "than you wished me to understand. . . . Is this not true?"

The boy did not answer. The creature's eyes—huge and catlike—held his.

"Answer me," the alien said.

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When the boy finally spoke, he said only, "Did you do it?"

The alien ignored him.

"Did you kill him?" the boy said.

"*Answer me*," the alien repeated, perfectly still.

"Yes . . ." the boy said, looking away at last.

"*How?*" the alien asked.

The boy did not answer. There was, the alien could see, defeat in the way the boy sat on the stool.

"You will answer me . . . or I will . . . damage this room."

The boy did nothing for a moment, then got up and moved slowly to the terminal where he studied each day.

"I've done a lot of work on your star," the boy said. There was little energy in his voice now.

"It is more than that," the alien said.

"Yes. I've studied Antalouan history." The boy paused and the alien felt the energy rise a little. "For school, I mean." There was feeling again—a little—to the boy's voice.

The boy hit the keyboard once, then twice, and the screen flickered to life. The alien saw a map of the northern hemisphere of Antalou, the trade routes of the ancient Seventh Empire, the fragmented continent, and the deadly seas that had doomed it.

"More than this . . . I think," the alien said.

"Yes," the boy said. "I did a report last year—on my own, not for school—about the fossil record on Antalou. There were a lot of animals that wanted the same food you wanted—that your kind wanted. On Antalou, I mean."

Yes, the alien thought.

"I ran across other things, too," the boy went on, and the alien heard the energy die again, heard in the boy's voice the suppressive feeling his kind called "despair." The boy believed that the man named Ortega-Mambay would still kill his sister, and so the boy "despaired."

Again the boy hit the keyboard. A new diagram appeared. It was familiar, though the alien had not seen one like it—so clinical, detailed, and ornate—in half a lifetime.

It was the Antalouan family cluster, and though the alien could not read them, he knew what the labels described: The "kinship obligation bonds" and their respective "motivational weights," the "defense-need parameters" and "bond-loss consequences" for identity and group membership. There was an inset, too, which gave—in animated three-dimensional display—the survival model human exopsychologists believed could explain all Antalouan behavior.

The boy hit the keyboard and an iconographic list of the "totemic bequeaths" and "kinship inheritances" from ancient burial sites near Toloa and Mantok appeared.

"You thought you knew," the alien said, "what an Antalou feels."

The boy kept his eyes on the floor. "Yes."

The alien did not speak for a moment, but when he did, it was to say:

"You were not wrong . . . Tuckey-Yatsen."

The boy looked up, not understanding.

"Your sister will live," the Antalou said.

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The boy blinked, but did not believe it.

"What I say is true," the alien said.

The alien watched as the boy's body began to straighten, as energy, no longer suppressed in "despair," moved through it.

"It was done," the alien explained, "without the killing . . . which neither you nor I . . . could afford."

"They will let her live?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"I do not lie . . . about the work I do."

The boy was staring at the alien.

"I will give you the money," he said.

"No," the alien said. "That will not . . . be necessary."

The boy stared for another moment, and then, strangely, began to move.

The alien watched, curious. The boy was making himself step toward him, though why he would do this the alien did not know. It was a human custom perhaps, a "sentimentality," and the boy, though afraid, thought he must offer it.

When the boy reached the alien, he put out an unsteady hand, touched the Antalou's shoulder lightly—once, twice—and then, remarkably, drew his hand down the alien's damaged arm.

The alien was astonished. It was an Antalouan gesture, this touch.

This is no ordinary boy, the alien thought. It was not simply the boy's intelligence—however one might measure it—or his understanding of the Antalou. It was something else—something the alien recognized.

Something any killer needs. . . .

The Antalouan gesture the boy had used meant "obligation to blood," though it lacked the slow unsheathing of the *demoor.* The boy had chosen well.

"Thank you," the boy was saying, and the alien knew he had rehearsed both the touch and the words. It had filled the boy with great fear, the thought of it, but he had rehearsed until fear no longer ruled him.

As the boy stepped back, shaking now and unable to stop it, he said, "Do you have a family-cluster still?"

"I do not," the alien answered, not surprised by the question. The boy no longer surprised him. "It was a decision . . . made without regrets. Many Antalou have made it. My work . . . prevents it. You understand. . . ."

The boy nodded, a gesture which meant that he did.

And then the boy said it:

"What is it like to kill?"

It was, the alien knew, the question the boy had most wanted to ask. There was excitement in the voice, but still no fear.

When the alien answered, it was to say simply:

"It is both . . . more and less . . . than what one . . . imagines it will be."

The boy named Kim Tuckey-Yatsen stood in the doorway of the small room where he slept and schooled, and listened as the man spoke to his mother and father. The man never looked at his mother's swollen belly. He said simply, "You have been granted an exception, Family Tuckey-Yatsen.

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You have permission to proceed with the delivery of the unborn female. You will be receiving confirmation of a Four-Member Family Waiver within three workweeks. All questions should be referred to BuPopCon, Seventh District, at the netnumber on this card."

When the man was gone, his mother cried in happiness and his father held her. When the boy stepped up to them, they embraced him, too. There were three of them now, hugging, and soon there would be four. That was what mattered. His parents were good people. They had taken a chance for him, and he loved them. That mattered too, he knew.

That night he dreamed of her again. Her name would be Kiara. In the dream she looked a little like Siddo's sister two floors down, but also like his mother. Daughters should look like their mothers, shouldn't they? In his dream the four of them were hugging and there were more rooms, and the rooms were bigger.

When the boy was seventeen and his sister five, sharing a single room as well as siblings can, the trunk arrived from Romah, one of the war-scarred worlds of the Pleiades. Pressurized and dented, the small alloy container bore the customs stamps of four spacelocks, had been opened at least seven times in its passage, and smelled. It had been disinfected, yes, the USPUS carrier who delivered it explained. It had been kept in quarantine for a year and had nearly not gotten through, given the circumstances.

At first, the boy did not know what the carrier meant.

The trunk held many things, the woman explained. The small polished skull of a carnivore not from Earth. A piece of space metal fused like the blossom of a flower. Two rings of polished stone that tingled to the touch. An ancient device that the boy would later discover was a third-generation airless communicator used by the Gar-Betties. A coil made of animal hair and pitch, which he would learn was a rare musical instrument from Hoggun VI. And many smaller things, among them the postcard of the Pacific Fountain the boy had given the alien.

Only later did the family receive official word of the 300,000 inters deposited in the boy's name in the neutral banking station of HiVerks; of the cache of specialized weapons few would understand that had been placed in perpetual care on Titan, also in his name; and of the offworld travel voucher purchased for the boy to use when he was old enough to use it.

Though it read like no will ever written on Earth, it was indeed a will, one that the Antalou called a "bequeathing cantation." That it had been recorded in a spacelock lobby shortly before the alien's violent death on a world called Glory did not diminish its legal authority.

Although the boy tried to explain it to them, his parents did not understand; and before long it did not matter. The money bought them five rooms in the northeast sector of the city, a better job for his mother, better care for his father's autoimmunities, more technical education for the boy, and all the food and clothes they needed; and for the time being (though only that) these things mattered more to him than Saturn's great moon and the marvelous weapons waiting patiently for him there. ○

—for Harry Harrison, master

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TEEN ANGEL

R. Garcia y Robertson

Tor has just released the author's latest "Lady Robyn" novel, *White Rose,* in papeback, and he is at work on a new book in the series entitled *King's Lady*. A fantasy hardcover novel, *Firebird,* will be out from Tor in the spring. Rod's latest tale for us is set in the same universe as his February 2005 cover story, "Oxygen Rising."

Deirdre of the Sorrows

"Here comes the Angel of Death." Deirdre heard some thug say it in slaver slang as she stepped out of the lock onto *Fafnir*'s E-deck. She fixed a smile on her face. Nice greeting, shipmate, let us hope it does not come true for you. The slaver's horrified look turned instantly into a stare as blank as the armored bulkhead.

Hardly the effect she hoped for. Having just shuttled up from Hades, she wore thigh-length leather boots beneath a shimmering cloth-of-silver kimono, cut short to show off her hips. With her came two SuperCat bodyguards, two-meter tall bioconstructs, Homo smilodon—half human, half feline—with tawny fur, curved dagger-like canines, human hands and forebrains, and tiny bobbed tails. This particular pair wore battle armor, riot pistols, and stun grenades, but the *Fafnir*'s crew did not give the gene-spliced killers a second glance. *She* was what scared them.

Having hardened Eridani slavers blanch at the sight of her was something new to Deirdre. Since birth she had been outrageously beautiful, a gorgeous baby that only grew more lovely. So lovely, that for much of her short life, she had been treated more like a gaudy objet d'art than a real person—witness her current black-leather geisha outfit. Even as an infant, men oohed and cooed over Deirdre, telling her how cute and lovely she was, happily predicting she would become a "real heart breaker."

That had yet to happen. Until she was twelve, Deirdre took this adulation as just another adult extravagance. Attention was nice, but hardly turned her head. Who wanted to be "a heart breaker" anyway? Not her.

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Growing up on New Harmony, she had been far more concerned with sleepovers and sky sailing. Her home world lived the way the King would, with tolerance and mercy to all. Looks were not everything—or so her parents said.

At age twelve Deirdre found out looks could indeed be everything, literally life and death, teaching her just how unusually beautiful she was. Huddled in a public blast shelter during the tail end of a slaver raid on Goodwill City, she prayed for Priscilla's protection, listened in horror as a slaver went through the shelter eliminating witnesses.

Whatever weapon the slaver used was noiseless. Eyes shut tight, Deirdre heard terrified pleas and cries of terror, cut off one by one, sobs and begging replaced by silence. She recognized her friends' voices, fellow members of the Lisa-Marie middle school's Humanities Club, who had left school early for a field trip, to cheer up terminal patients at a local hospice. Now they were dying horribly.

Finally the killer's footsteps came to her. She looked up into the black muzzle of a silenced machine pistol.

Too terrified to cry, she watched the man's eyes widen, his finger frozen on the firing stud. For a long moment they stared at each other, killer and victim. Then she saw that familiar reassuring smile. He liked how she looked.

Holstering his pistol, the man helped Deirdre up, and led her out of the shelter, stepping over the bodies of strangers and schoolmates, finding her a seat on a shuttle bound for orbit—bumping off a huge, heavily armed felon with hideous tattoos and a horrendous price on his head. Justice was closing in, and slavers were in a mad scramble to board, facing automatic death sentences if they failed. Slaving was the only capital offense left on New Harmony—since the King taught mercy and tolerance, not total suicide. Yet the fleeing raiders cheerfully made room for her, talking softly and trying not to scare her. All the way into orbit, a tattooed killer held Deirdre's hand, telling her not to be afraid as they left home far behind.

That was when she was twelve. Slavers saw that she grew even more beautiful, blossoming into a radiant young woman under strict diet and constant exercise, with biosculpt ridding her of any incipient blemish. At eighteen she was stunning, which made the hateful looks from the *Fafnir*'s crew all the more appalling.

Worse yet, Deirdre knew it was true. She was the Angel of Death, for them and for her. Konar would not have brought her aboard unless he meant to die. If Konar thought he could win the upcoming fight, he would have left her on Hades, which was honeycombed with blast shelters and secret bunkers dug by slavers over the centuries. Bringing her aboard was as good as saying there were no safe refuges, and this was the last fight. Konar would never leave his flagship alive, and had brought his sex toy aboard to die with him.

Her stomach heaved as she entered the starboard lift, and slavers hurriedly got out, leaving it to her and the SuperCats. Recycled air reeked of sweat, fear, and synthetic sealants. She ignored the hostile looks, knowing it was not her they hated, just what she represented—the ghastly fate

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hanging over them all. Nuclear annihilation was about the nicest future they could anticipate. Or explosive decompression.

Doors dilated for her. Tubes and ducts snaked overhead. *Fafnir* began life as the high-g survey ship *Endurance*, but slavers had taken her on her maiden voyage, turning her into a warship, with blast shields and armored bulkheads, stripping and reinforcing the hull, making *Fafnir* stronger, faster, more focused to a task, ruthlessly discarding whatever they did not want. Not unlike what they did to Deirdre.

Commander Hess of the *Hiryu* greeted her on A-deck; dark eyed, black-haired, and alert, he wore his dress uniform thrown open to show the flying dragon tattoo curled round his left nipple. Too professional to display fear, Hess bowed neatly, with a flick of his black curls, and a curt click of his heels. "If my lady will follow me." He showed the way with his palm.

"How goes the *Hiryu*?" This was a silly stab at making conversation, since all of Konar's ships were surely doomed.

"Could not be better," Hess lied casually. Things could hardly be worse, with Navy cruisers headed insystem, slowing from near light speed. *Hiryu* faced a losing battle along with the rest of Konar's little fleet, but the one nice thing about Hess was that he never deigned to show his feelings. Deirdre appreciated this reticence, since Commander Hess's inner workings sickened her. Physically. Being this close to Hess made her want to barf up her gourmet lunch.

Her quarters had a hemispherical pressure hatch, a sad indication that someone thought the main pressure would fail. The slaver on duty gulped at seeing her, asking Hess, "Is she wired?"

Hess nodded curtly. By now Deirdre was used to being discussed in third person. "Where's her remote?" the guard demanded. Hess gave him a "where-do-you-think" look, and the slaver shut up. Dismissing the SuperCats, Hess led her through the hatch, into the cabin.

Immense vistas opened up before her. Picture windows looked out over forest and sea, as if the cabin sat on a pine-clad pinnacle above a river valley filled with woods and farmland. In the foreground she saw a fishing village, and, farther down river, a port city stood at the mouth of a fjord. Storm clouds hung over the distant ocean, but an orange-red sun shone down on the cabin, framed by a small pair of moons. All extremely unreal, since the cabin was buried deep in a starship, behind layers of armored bulkheads. Living quarters on *Fafnir* were still those of a deep space survey ship, using 3V and sensurround to keep claustrophobia at bay.

Deirdre could smell the pines, and hear birds singing above the drone of insects. Rock climbers waved to her from a nearby pinnacle, a fun group of healthy young people, close enough to call to from the "balcony" beyond the windows—if you wanted to talk to holos. She asked Hess, "Is this world real?"

"Elysium, Delta Eridani II, we raided it once." Hess grinned at the virtual landscape. "Not a full out landing—Delta E is too far in for that—just a picked team with pre-set targets." Hess meant a kidnapping. Not all slaver crimes were on the horrific scale of the New Harmony Raid; sometimes they slipped into civilized systems, snatching up valuable in-

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dividuals for ransom, or resale. "But a rousing success nonetheless." Hess preened, as if she should congratulate him.

He already had her missing the SuperCats. "Can I change it?" Deirdre asked. Delta E meant nothing to her.

"Your bunkmates might object." Hess nodded at the balcony, where two children had come out to call to the climbers—a boy about eight or nine with impossibly purple hair, spiked on top, and a girl a couple of years older, whose squared-off blonde hair ended in a shoulder-level blue stripe.

"Bunkmates?" She thought they were holos. The purple-haired boy scrambled up onto the balcony rail, leaning over the virtual gap, waving vigorously at the climbers, while the blonde girl with the blue fringe looked bored. Alike enough to be brother and sister, they wore expensive Home System outfits, cut down versions of adult fashions. Appalled to find these were real kids, Deirdre hissed, "Who are they?"

"Insurance," Hess replied airily.

"What does that mean?" It was bad enough that she was going to die—did she have to watch kids die as well?

"They are the grandchildren of Albrecht Van Ho, Director General of River Lines," Hess explained. "That pair of AMCs headed insystem belong to River Lines. They might be a shade less eager to vaporize us with these two aboard."

Maybe. Personally, she hated staking her existence on corporate pity. River Lines had not operated for centuries in the worst stretches of the Eridani by pulling punches. Having no mercy themselves, slavers misjudged kindness in others—taking it for weakness, or stupidity. Did anyone really think the Navy would give up and go home rather than fry some CEO's grandkids? For Priscilla's sake, why not just load *Fafnir* up with baby puppies?

Deirdre had long ago stopped trying to explain compassion to Commander Hess. New Harmony had taught her to do good for others. "Love thy neighbor," is what the King said, and what he practiced, moving Priscilla in next door to Graceland. It worked for Elvis, and it worked for her. Compassion came easy, when a kind word or a simple favor from a girl so lovely as her brightened anyone's day. Deirdre liked people thinking her a darling angel—not knowing how little effort it took. Like giving away Cadillacs, when you owned a zillion of them.

When she first arrived on Hades, Deirdre tried diligently to live by the laws of New Harmony, treating everyone with kindness, sympathy, and understanding, hoping for fairness in return—vastly amusing her captors. Slavers raised the price of compassion, teaching Deirdre to keep such feelings to herself. They cared not a whit how others felt, which was their biggest failing, the one most likely to get them all killed. But try telling that to an Eridani slaver. Otherwise they were orderly and efficient, and extremely good at what they did, which was kidnapping people for sale, ransom, or personal use. Deirdre complained, "Do I have to bunk with them?"

Her best chance of getting away was to convince some man that she was well worth saving. Hauling two kids about easily halved her slim chances.

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Hess shrugged, "No room. Ship-of-war, and all that. Besides, this is not so bad," he looked happily about, running a keen reaver's gaze over the cabin's real ivory inlay, and pre-atomic cut crystal. Commander Hess was mysteriously immune to the pall her arrival cast over the flagship. Did Hess know something that she did not? Probably. His smile broadened, the first real smile she had seen since coming aboard. Hess asked, "We have come a long way, haven't we?"

Deirdre did not answer. Hess had saved her life, forming a weird bond between them, though it hardly made them close. She had been living with slavers since she was twelve, but Commander Hess was the one that gave her nightmares, scaring her more than any of them, more than Konar himself. Just being in the same room with him gave her the cold, screaming shivers.

Hess was the slaver who went through that Goodwill City blast shelter, killing everyone but her. Six years later, she could still hear her classmates' pleas and screams in her head, echoing off steel reinforced walls. And she always feared Hess would one day kill her, just to finish the job. Some nights Deirdre dreamed she was back in the blast shelter, staring into the pistol muzzle, only this time Hess pulled the trigger, and she felt the silent bullets strike.

Commander Hess of the *Hiryu* did another little heel-clicking bow, then left. Thank Gladys. Deirdre sank down into a glove leather chair, mulling options. The two well-dressed kids were still out on the balcony, waving stupidly at the holos—at least the boy was. Deirdre had friends and contacts on Hades that she ached to talk to, but *Fafnir* was under communications lock down—leaving her on her own.

Shutting her eyes, Deirdre tried desperately to think. She could not die, not with rescue only light hours away. Somehow she would save herself. But how? Behind her blemishless, biosculpted features, lurked the hideous truth that beauty was only skin deep—it did not make her better, smarter, or more noble. It did not even make her nicer, though people liked to think so. So far it just made for incredibly weird relations with men.

"Cool boots."

She opened her eyes. Both kids had come in from the balcony, and the boy with spiked purple hair stood in front of her, staring at her black leather boots. He looked up at her, saying, "So, what are you doing in my Grand-dad's cabin?"

Her inquisitor wore a natty man's jacket, cut just for him, and neatly tailored pants. His own shoes were a pricy pair of snake-skin slippers over silk stockings. He asked again, "What are you doing in Grand-dad's cabin?"

"He still thinks we are on Elysium," the girl explained. She was older than her brother, but not by much. Up close they were clearly brother and sister, even though his hair was purple, and hers blue-blonde.

"Prove we are not," the boy insisted. His sister rolled her blue eyes—like she really had to "prove" they were abducted by slavers, and light years from anywhere.

Deirdre sighed. "Chuck him over the balcony rail, that will show him." Despite the yawning virtual cliff, there was no drop "outside." A swan dive

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off the balcony would end in a belly flop on the cabin deck, masked by holographic display. But it was not Deirdre's job to disillusion him. If the boy wanted to believe he was safe at home—instead of on a slaver starship about to be obliterated—what was the harm?

"Who are you?" the girl asked, wearing the junior miss version of her brother's outfit, right down to the snake-skin slippers, except she had on a pleated skirt in place of pants, and cuffs trimmed with lace. There was no need to ask their names— "Heather" and "Jason" were on their jacket collars.

"Deirdre." She made an effort to smile, sitting up in her seat. Just because they were all going to die was no reason not to be cheerful.

"Where are you from?" Jason demanded. "We're from Elysium." He pointed to the panorama outside the picture windows.

Right. She glanced at the supposed scene outside. Skycycles circled over the village below, riding thermals off steep pine-clad cliffs, red-gold afternoon sun glinting on their control surfaces—too bad it was not true. "I'm from New Harmony," she admitted, sinking back in the chair, knowing what children raised in a place like this would think.

"New Hicksville," scoffed the boy. "Hippie planet."

Heather told him, "It's not nice to say that," though you could tell by her tone the blonde girl thought it was true.

Deirdre widened her smile to include Jason, thinking, "At least New Harmony is a real planet, you little preppy-suited marmoset. I'm not making do with a holo, and pretending it's home." But she did not say it, meeting rudeness with a smile. Her "hippie planet" had taught her not to taunt helpless doomed children, no matter how richly they deserved it.

"Where do you think we are?" Heather asked, stepping closer, ignoring her brother's pretense of being safe at home.

"You're off planet," Deidre told them, trying to break it to them slowly. Way off planet.

Heather nodded soberly, "I guessed that. We have been gone for so long without anyone finding us." She was smart, belying what folks said about dyed blondes. Smart enough to be far more scared than her brother.

"But if they could take us off planet, they could have taken us to Grandfather's lodge," the boy insisted. Kept alone like this, brother-sister bickering must be the main entertainment.

"Where off planet?" Heather asked, not bothering to contradict her brother.

"Tartarus system." She saw their blank stares. "Way the heck into the Outback. Triple system in the Far Eridani, a small red dwarf primary, Tartarus A, and a distant pair of white dwarf binaries—too far away to much affect Hades. That is the planet we are orbiting."

"Orbiting?" They both looked askance—the cabin seemed solidly rooted atop its mountain ridge.

"We are aboard a starship."

Jason scoffed, but Heather asked, "What starship?" Above hiding behind fantasy, Heather wanted to hear the whole truth.

Not that the girl would get that from Deirdre, who did not mean to tell these kids they would soon be blown to photons. "She's the *Fafnir*, used to

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be the survey ship *Endurance*. Slavers have her now." She must let the kids know that these were evil men, never to be trusted; though, needless to say, slavers had no sense of privacy, routinely recording everything important prisoners did and said, preventing escapes and providing amusement.

"Slavers?" Heather looked less horrified than she should have—but the girl could not possibly imagine how bad things were. So far they had treated the kids royally. "Is that who that man with the dragon tattoo was, the one you talked to?" Heather had been watching her and Hess.

"One of the worst." Deirdre nodded solemnly, knowing Hess would relish the compliment. "But their leader's name is Konar."

"Why have they brought us here?" Heather's hand took hold of the silver hem of Deirdre's kimono, silently twisting the fabric where it rested on the chair, the only sign of how much the question scared her.

"For ransom from your grandfather." Sort of. No harm in letting them hope to get home alive.

"What about you?" Jason asked, resenting her taking his sister's side. "Why are you here?" He stubbornly refused to admit that "here" was not his home.

Why indeed? "I was kidnapped too, from New Harmony."

"He means, why did they kidnap you?" Heather guessed that no hick from New Harmony had a trillionaire grandfather.

Deirdre heaved a sigh, not wanting to go into this too deeply. "Because I am pretty. And I am now Konar's girlfriend." Sort of. His property more precisely, but who needed to hear that? She had spent her teen years working her way up the slaver hierarchy, and at eighteen had hit the top. "He is the head slaver who commands this ship. The whole system, really."

"Why?" Jason looked disbelieving. "Isn't that gross?"

"Do you love him?" asked Heather.

Like she had a choice. Deirdre was saved from having to answer by a chime going off in her head—one only she could hear. She sat up in her chair, saying, "Have to go."

"Go where?" Heather was appalled to find her leaving.

Deirdre gently untwined Heather's fingers from the kimono, solemnly taking the girl's hand in hers. "I'll be back," she promised, hoping it was the truth. In less than an hour, she had gone from not wanting to see these kids, to not wanting to leave them. Even the condemned craved human contact.

Deirdre called out to the door, and it dilated. The slaver on duty stuck his head in, and she told him, "He wants to see me." By "he" she meant Konar. Konar had a garish title—Grand Dragon of the Free Brotherhood—but no one ever used it, least of all Deirdre. Konar was "he" or "him"—or in rare moments of affection, "the Old Man" or "Old Snake Nick." Otherwise, he was just Konar. Like Hitler, or Satan. Everyone knew who you meant.

Except for these two little rich kids. "Where are you going?" Heather asked plaintively. Jason looked truculent, but if he meant to throw a tantrum he was out of luck. *Fafnir* ran on raw testosterone, and when

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Konar called for her services, even a grandson of General Director Albrecht Van Ho had to wait.

"So let's not keep him," the slaver suggested. He casually aimed a remote at the kids, his finger on SLEEP.

Standing up, she bid the kids good-bye, following the slaver down to C-deck. Konar did not need holographic vistas to stay sane, and his command cabin seemed incredibly spare compared to the sumptuous quarters of his hostages—just four bulkheads and a float-a-bed. Slavers cared little for status, valuing people for their own sake. That was the sole way they resembled folks on New Harmony.

As she entered, Konar was meeting with his captains around a virtual conference table. Hess was there in the flesh, but the captains of the *Fukuryu* and the *Hydra*, and their first lieutenants, were holograms beamed from the ships.

Speed-of-light lag delayed their reactions to her entrance, but several looked shocked. None showed fear, though they knew best how thin the odds were. These were old-time slavers, who had lived with their death sentences for so long they almost seemed born with them. All of them had survived botched raids, grueling life and death chases, hairbreadth escapes from hopeless situations, ghastly torture sessions, and gruesome prisoner eliminations. Incoming government cruisers did not frighten them much, and pretty teenagers did not scare them a whit. She was just one of the perks that made such horrendous risks worthwhile.

Her own remote lay on the float-a-bed, so she sat down beside it. Konar treated her like a piece of disappearing furniture—she came when he called, then left when he dismissed her. Other than that, she was an integral part of his life. On Hades she sat in on his conferences and private suppers, listened to his troubles, rubbed his temples while he thought, and told him stories about her childhood on New Harmony, attending to Konar's every need while they were together.

Watching him give orders, she tried to tell if Konar meant to die. He looked as vital as ever, his compact bull-like body stripped to the waist, with tattooed dragons, crawling over his naked torso, his most fascinating feature by far. Sometimes Deirdre lost herself in those dragons, following them across his body for hours, forgetting everything else. Each dragon had a story, a successful raid, a ship he captured or commanded; occasionally he told her the stories, the closest he ever came to boasting. Otherwise he was nothing special to look at, with a blunt bald head, alert eyes, ferocious strength, and a genial smile. Except that this nondescript face was infamous, known and feared throughout the Eridani.

Floating above the table top was a 3V display, showing different parts of Tartarus system. Tartarus and Hades hung near the center of the display, along with Hades' two moons, Minos and Charon. Farther out came the gas giants Cerberus and Persephone. Still farther out, at the extreme edge of the display were Tartarus' twin companions, two white dwarfs spinning around each other. Seen as tiny sparks of light, the slavers' situation did not look so bad. Three government cruisers were headed insystem, accompanied by a pair of smaller corvettes. Four slaver ships stood ready to face them—*Fafnir*, *Hiryu*, *Fukuryu*, and *Hydra*.

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Five to four did not seem overwhelming, but the numbers were horribly deceiving. *Hydra* was the converted colony ship *Liberia*, helpless in battle. And leading the incoming ships was the Navy light cruiser *Atalanta*, which outgunned the entire slaver fleet. For once the vastness of space worked against the slavers, giving them nowhere to hide. Abandon Tartarus system, and their ships would be run down in the emptiness of interstellar space. It was win or die. Typically Konar tackled the task head on, telling his captains that he and *Fafnir* would face *Atalanta*. "You gentlemen must make do with what is left."

They laughed. Konar wanted *Hiryu*, *Fukuryu*, and *Hydra* to face down two merchant cruisers and the corvettes—a stiff fight, but not half what Konar faced. Konar was using his fabled reputation to finesse the most alarming problem—the *Atalanta*. If anyone could defeat a Navy cruiser with a converted survey ship, it was Old Snake Nick.

On that light note Konar closed the conference. Hologram captains winked out with their lieutenants, leaving Konar and Hess—the only ones physically aboard the *Fafnir*. Neither bothered to look at her. Leaning across the virtual table, Hess whispered conspiratorially, "You know there are other ways to do it than diving down their throats."

Konar settled back in his seat, eyeing Hess. Konar was the only person Hess was honest with. Deirdre did not think anyone could lie to Konar. Certainly not her, and probably not Hess. Konar did not bother with galvanic sensors or reading heart rates—having seen so many people saying anything to save themselves, he knew all the "tells" that gave liars away. Smiling grimly, he asked Hess, "How goes the escape pod?"

Hess nodded. "Totally operational. Waiting to be used."

"The pod only carries six," Konar pointed out.

Hess shrugged. "Whoever thought the hounds would get this far? There was no time to increase capacity. The others would just have to be convinced to carry on without us."

Konar laughed at that. Both of them acted she was not there, casually discussing escapes and betrayals as if Deirdre were part of the float-a-bed. But neither did anything by accident. Hess had his own way of dealing with truth, and probably counted her as dead already. While Konar might want her to know all about the escape plan, to get her hopes up for some purpose known only to him.

And her hopes were up. Way up. Suddenly she might actually live through this nightmare. Six seats in this "escape pod" meant two for them, and four to be filled. Why bring her up from Hades, unless Konar wanted her in one of those seats? He must have known she would scare the heck out of his crew.

"Escape to where?" Konar sounded doubtful. "Six of us in a tiny boat, alone in an awfully big cosmos." Right now Konar was king of his world, with a whole system-cum-slave-emporium at his command. Hades was not just his hide-out, but a hub for slaving throughout the Far Eridani, where ships and cargoes were fenced, where deals were struck and prisoners resold—all in a fleshy carnival mood catering to crews on leave. Why trade his personal pleasure planet for a tiny escape pod headed into the void?

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"Where there is life, there is hope," Hess suggested. "The pod is on the hangar deck, in berth L, programmed to go—code word 'Medea.' Use it, or not." With that Hess got up, his chair vanishing into the deck, along with the table, leaving the 3V display hanging in space. Hess grinned at her, doing a swift nodding bow, then left, tickled to see the girl he saved, all grown up and sitting on his boss' float-a-bed. Yet another coup for the *Hiryu*'s able commander.

Konar studied the hanging 3V display, not acknowledging her arrival. Deirdre waited. Without looking at her, Konar ordered, "Take off the kimono."

She got up and obeyed. Konar liked seeing her in just the leather boots, never letting her wear underwear. Other than that, his tastes were pretty plain. Sex was not that important to Konar. He did not need it all the time, or to twist it into anything kinky—not much at least. By now she was the galaxy's foremost authority on the Grand Dragon's sex preferences, and while Konar might be an insane mass murderer, he was thankfully not much of a sadist. So long as he had the most beautiful woman available at his complete command, Konar seemed fairly content with extreme mental cruelty.

He turned and grinned, liking what he saw. She smiled back, determined to win a seat in that escape pod, set to give Konar a reason to live, and to save her as well.

Picking up her remote, Konar stroked her cheek with his free hand. He was hardly taller than her. Konar always said size did not matter—"Napoleon was shorter than you." When she had to ask who Napoleon was, he laughed, telling her a story of Old Earth, from the days before Elvis. His fingers came to rest on her bare shoulder. "Are you nervous?"

Her smile had not fooled him. She nodded earnestly, knowing she could not lie her way into that escape pod, not to Konar.

"Don't be frightened," he told her, thumbing her remote. "Be sexy."

Immediately she was not frightened, not in the least. Sharp urgent desire shot through her, going from groin to nipples. She wanted the slaver's strong, merciless tattooed body inside her—right now. Konar had skipped the setting for foreplay, and internal wiring allowed him to bring her to orgasm at the press of a button. She opened her mouth to say how much she wanted him, to beg Konar to take her with him—just her and him, so they could be together forever and ever. Konar pushed MUTE.

Sex with Konar was never boring. Sometimes he liked to play with the remote, forcing her through every physical-emotional state from abject terror to repeated multiple orgasm, merely for his private amusement. Or to entertain a guest. Twice he did it for Hess. But no one needed that now, least of all Deirdre. She had already gone through every emotion she could imagine, from abject horror at leaving Hades, to orgiastic hope that she might somehow survive this, if she just pleased Konar totally. She had been by turns scared, surprised, amused, maternal, wary, hopeful, and now sex crazed. And it was still the morning watch.

When he was fully inside her, Konar whispered, "Do not worry about being left behind."

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His words cut through the haze of desire. Deirdre very much wanted to be left on Hades, but she could not say it, even if she had dared. All her being was fixed on pleasing Konar, and earning a seat on that escape pod. Konar could tell, and when he was done, he patted her butt, saying, "I will never give you up."

Just what every girl wants to hear. Even Konar had a human side, somewhere. Back in her shared cabin, Deirdre collapsed in the sauna, telling warm water to cascade over her. Too wrung out to think, she listened to the drops pound down on her, glad to have a moment to herself, with nothing to plan, or evaluate, or submit to—just pure, clean, clear, warm water, carrying her worries away.

Despite all the glowing predictions, Deirdre's luck with men had been ghastly. Fate had simply fallen on her out of orbit. Had she left school later, or ducked into a different shelter when the sirens sounded, her life would have been totally different. She might already be dead. Deirdre thanked Elvis for giving her life and hope, glad he had an undying love for teenage girls—who had first made him King.

Jason was there when she got out, saying his sister was asleep, wanting to know, "Where did you go? Was that guy you talked with really a slaver?" He was warming to the idea that they were on a warship full of space pirates.

"Let's not talk about it," she told him, settling into the soft pneumatic leather chair. With just four free seats on the escape pod, there was plainly no room for an opinionated little brat. If Konar wanted a hostage, he would take Heather. Most likely they would leave both kids to die. Horrible, but hardly her fault.

"Well, tell me about this planet we are supposed to be orbiting." Another male needing to be entertained.

She stared at the purple-haired punk, wondering if she was doing him any favors, coddling and protecting him with her lying smiles. It only made her look like a pretty push-over with a space pirate boyfriend. "Do you want to see Hades?"

"Sure." He practically dared her to show him.

You asked for it. She told the cabin to reconfigure, projecting an image of Hades' surface outside the picture windows. Water, people, homes, greenery, blue skies, and sail planes vanished—replaced by a fiery vision of hell. Red searing landscape stretched away toward scarlet wind-carved cliffs, topped with orange-brown storm clouds, rent by violet lightning. Their cabin appeared to rest on a tall pink sand dune, surrounded by red rubble crushed beneath dense carbon dioxide atmosphere, flat as a sea floor and hot as hell's basement. Sulfuric rain fell on the highlands from the brown clouds, forming boiling acid rivers that vaporized before reaching the sizzling valley floor. Deirdre could taste the ozone on her tongue.

"Too cool." Jason looked awestruck, and not the least frightened.

Her smile returned. There was hope for the boy after all, who had the plain good sense to compliment her boots. Konar's favorites as well. "That's just the surface," she told him, "the good stuff is all underground."

Jason ran out onto the balcony to get a better look. She closed her eyes, hoping that Hades' seething cauldron would give her some time to rest.

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She needed sleep if Konar called again. Thank Elvis she was not trying to please Hess.

Konar did not call, and Hess left to command the *Hiryu*—both ominous signs, of which Konar not calling was the worst. She desperately needed to be with him, to know for sure she too would live. Not even her remote had ever made her want Konar so much.

Hess's leaving implied the escape plan was on hold, since she could hardly picture Hess giving up his seat to someone else. Deirdre doubted the slaver Hess bumped for her in New Harmony ever got out of Goodwill City. Desperate to save herself, she asked the ship's computer what was stored on H-deck, berth L, and the answer came back— "Berth L contains *Endurance*'s spare lifeboat, reconditioned for special use, coded access only." Originally, *Endurance* had two such lifeboats—each able to carry the entire survey crew. There was no record of what happened to the other one. Deirdre weighed using the code word "Medea" to get more information, but that might draw unwanted attention. She had to trust that Hess did his job right, and escape was waiting if Konar wanted to use it.

Time passed, terrifying her even more. Her hot sweaty visit with Konar began to look like one last boink for old times sake, because they were soon headed up-sun on a high-g boost, going headfirst into battle—making it even harder to keep up a cheery front for Heather and Jason. Deirdre wanted to shriek and scream in protest, but that would have done nothing for the children's morale.

Her worst fears were confirmed when Konar came on 3V to send a mocking challenge to the cruiser *Atalanta*, complete with holos of Heather and Jason, telling the Navy to vacate Tartarus system tout de suite. Or get set to die.

Atalanta's answer was a long range salvo of Toryu— "Dragon Killer"—torpedoes. *Fafnir* replied with anti-missile fire and the fight was on.

Konar left the 3V channel open so his crew could follow the action. Deirdre watched horrified, holding Heather's hand, as high-g torpedoes raced toward the *Fafnir*. "What's happening?" Jason asked, enthralled by the notion of being in a battle, but unable to make much out of the 3V display. Missiles and counter-missiles flashed between the fleets, but there were no explosions in space, since antimatter warheads released most of their energy as hard radiation, not visible light. Only ship movements showed clearly. As *Fafnir* engaged *Atalanta*, the rest of the slaver ships, led by *Fukuryu*, attacked the two merchant cruisers.

"Who's winning?" Jason demanded, as *Fukuryu*—the "Lucky Dragon"—took on the lead merchant cruiser, the converted River Lines packet *Niger*.

No one, you idiot, thought Deirdre. A lot of folks—good, bad, and in between—were going to die for nothing, and Deirdre did not want to be one of them. She squeezed Heather's hand. "How good an actress are you?"

Heather looked hopefully up at her. "I was Romeo in our class play. None of the boys wanted to do the balcony scene."

Sounds promising. "Can you pretend to be hurt?"

"How hurt?" Heather asked.

"Badly hurt. Can you do convulsive shock?"

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Heather nodded; if she could play a boy she could play anything. "Show me," Deirdre demanded.

Throwing herself on the cabin deck, Heather started shaking and rolling her eyes, tossing herself about, and gagging horribly.

"Great," Deirdre whispered, "drool a little, too." Arching her back, limbs twitching, Heather dribbled spittle on the deck. Perfect. "Keep it up," Deirdre hissed, then she called for the slaver on duty.

Dilating the door, the slaver stuck his head in. Seeing Heather flopping about, he asked, "What is wrong with her?"

Grabbing the guard's arm, Deirdre dragged him over to where Heather lay writhing, saying, "She's having a fit, and needs to go to the infirmary." The slaver looked unconvinced.

Jason cheered. Everyone but Heather looked at the display. Great plumes of gas shot out of the lead merchant cruiser, which immediately lost power and fell behind. *Fukuryu* had gotten a direct hit on the *Niger*, knocking out its fusion reactor and gravity drive. Only a fried warhead kept the missile from blowing the converted liner to pieces. The slaver cheered too, using the "Lucky Dragons' " nickname— "Good Old Fuck-a-You. Hit her again you bastards." He was shaking as hard as Heather.

"Look, if you won't take her to sickbay, I will." Deirdre seized the children's remote from the slaver's belt.

"Sure, sure," he did not even look at her, still fixated on the display, where his life or death was being decided. The second merchant cruiser, *Jordan River*, was taking on the *Fukuryu*.

Helping Heather up, she hustled the twitching girl toward the door, grabbing Jason with her free hand. He started to protest, saying there was nothing wrong with him, or his sister, but Deirdre stabbed MUTE on the remote. At the door, she heard a groan from the slaver. Looking back at the cabin display, she saw *Fukuryu* disintegrate under fire. The "Lucky Dragon"—Good Old Fuck-a-You—was gone, blasted to bits by the *Jordan River*.

The last words she heard from the slaver were, "Damn you Hess to hell." *Hiryu* had turned away, leaving the slower *Hydra* to face *Jordan River,* and the crippled *Niger*. *Hiryu* was a converted gravity yacht, the fastest ship Konar had, and Commander Hess was not the type to face death happily. Not when others could face it for him.

Telling Heather to stop shaking, she headed straight for the hangar deck with the two children in tow. Personal access codes got her past the hangar door, and "Medea" got her into berth L, where the *Endurance*'s reconditioned lifeboat sat waiting, covered in curved battle armor. Inside were six crash couches; all the rest of the crew space had been sacrificed to double the gravity drive. Too bad three of the couches were going to lift empty, but there was literally no one aboard she could trust to take with her, no one who would not happily rape her and sell the children to the highest bidder.

Deirdre baby-strapped the kids in the command couches, tilting them back to keep their hands away from the controls, then picked the crew-chief's couch for herself—there she could run things while keeping watch on her charges. Hoping Hess knew what he was doing, she gave the com-

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mand, and the escape pod flung itself away from *Fafnir*, headed outsystem at better than 20-gs.

And not a minute too soon. Fifty-three point two seconds after they separated, an antimatter warhead penetrated *Fafnir*'s defenses, burying itself in Konar's flagship. Matter and antimatter came together, and *Fafnir* disappeared in a flash of hard radiation that blanked the escape pod's screens. Built to withstand the particle storm at near light speed, the redesigned lifeboat easily bucked the blast that obliterated *Fafnir*.

Inferno

"Still think we're on Elysium?" snorted Heather. Jason glared at her, but did not answer. Screens in front of him had flashed back on, showing Hades and the rest of the inner system receding at high speed.

Unfazed by the bickering, Deirdre was ecstatic, feeling gloriously alive and free. Not only would she live, but her every act was no longer monitored and recorded. She could shower or change without leaving a permanent record for slavers to enjoy, and she could do it whenever she wished. Her remote had been blown to atoms along with the *Fafnir*. She was still wired for control, but, without the coded remote, she was effectively free. No one could play with her emotions, or force her to do what she did not want.

Not even Konar. Her lord and master was gone too. How strange to think that Konar was dead, his tattooed body vaporized. He had been such a force of nature, controlling her life and the lives of everyone around her. Konar certainly deserved to die, no doubt about it. Slaving was the only capital offense left in most systems, a distinction that slavers had worked hard to earn, overcoming every human impulse for forgiveness. By the time Deirdre became Konar's property, she had given up hating every slaver she met, instead responding to how they treated her. And Konar had treated her well—up until the end. The worst thing he ever did was to call her up from Hades to die, and that resulted in setting her free.

"Where are we anyway?" Heather asked, staring at an enhanced view of local space. "This does not look at all like home."

Jason did not rise to the bait, still baby-strapped to the command couch, giving his sister an intensely dirty look.

Deirdre studied the screens to get her bearings. Hades was still the closest planet, though shrinking visibly. *Hydra* was the nearest ship, loudly broadcasting her surrender. *Hiryu* was hurrying away at high acceleration, pursued by *Atalanta*, while the two accompanying corvettes, *Calais* and *Zetes,* were headed Deirdre's way at flank speed. Any survivors from Konar's flagship rated immediate naval attention. She told Heather, "We are headed outsystem, tailed by two high-g naval corvettes."

Heather asked, "If we just turned around, would they take us home?"

"Probably," Deirdre admitted, "but that would mean reprogramming

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this lifeboat without proper codes." Not something she felt up to doing. "Medea" set the program in motion, but did not let Deirdre change direction.

"We could just shut off the gravity drive," Heather suggested, "and let them catch up."

"Maybe." Deirdre was not so sure. Hess had designed this program, and would surely assume that anyone tampering with his system was better off dead. "But this drive could easily be set to blow if we try to shut it down."

"We could at least call the Navy," Heather protested, "and tell them who we are. . . ."

"Even that might be suicide," Deirdre pointed out. "We have to trust in the escape program." And in Commander Hess.

"What?" Heather could not believe her. "That's crazy." Looking to her brother for support, Heather only got a disgusted glare, so she turned back to Deirdre, asking, "Why keep faith with these dead pirates?"

"Because if we do not, they will kill us, too." That was Hess' hallmark, the utter willingness to kill whoever became even the least threat, or merely a nuisance. Which made him way worse than Konar—who preferred control and manipulation to outright murder. Konar had been a charismatic megalomaniac, who Deirdre feared and respected. Hess gave her the galloping creeps.

Heather turned back to her brother, saying, "You tell her. This is so totally silly. . . ."

Jason replied with a withering look, but did not deign to answer. Which was odd, since the boy normally could not bear an unexpressed thought.

His sister asked, "What's the matter, still mad we are not at home?"

"Damn, left him on MUTE." Deirdre remembered the remote, fished it out and turned the boy's speech center back on.

"You silly blue-headed imbecile," Jason yelled at his sister, "I swear we are not related. Hello? Cosmos to Heather. I was muted, remember? That's why I was not answering!"

"Sorry," his big sister replied sarcastically. "I thought you were just listening for once, maybe even thinking ahead. Sadly I was wrong."

"Hallelujah," her brother rejoiced. "Tits-for-brains is wrong about something. . . ."

Heather turned back to Deirdre, pleading, "Please, please turn him off."

While they fought, Deirdre looked about the escape pod, seeing a standard survey ship lifeboat, with increased shielding, expanded powerplant, and added antimatter tanks. No wonder it could hold only a fraction of the survey ship's original crew. *Endurance* originally had two such lifeboats, each intended to carry all twenty-four crew members—if necessary. Now it was none too roomy for the three of them, with no privacy except in the bath cubicle. Six would have been a stretch.

Turning back to the screens, she watched the corvettes slowly cut the gap between them. Despite that expanded powerplant, they still had a snail's chance of outrunning a real starship—much less two naval corvettes. *Calais* and *Zetes* would easily run down the escape pod before it reached a neighboring system. How could Hess or Konar have hoped to

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escape? Elvis knows, neither of them was stupid. All Deirdre could do was pray Hess had planned this to perfection, relying on his ruthless sense of self-preservation to work in her favor for once.

Heather wanted to at least signal their pursuers, accusing her of still being the pirates' prisoner. "You are so used to doing their bidding that you are obeying their orders, even though they are dead."

"With damned good reason," Deirdre retorted. "If you knew them half as well as I do, you would, too." Besides, Hess was not dead. Commander Hess and the *Hiryu* had a good head start, and half a chance of getting away—now that the two corvettes that could have caught him were coming after her. And she did not dare call them off. How horribly unfair.

Which pretty much summed up her life, from the moment slavers entered that public blast-shelter on New Harmony and began killing people. Heather was right, life among slavers had taught Deirdre obedient detachment, and she felt curiously unconcerned by the corvettes closing in on them. Hess had planned for this, and he knew every hiding place and bolt hole in this part of space. Slavers had hideouts the Navy knew nothing about, accessed by secret gates in out of the way worlds. Deirdre had never heard of any such gates in Tartarus system—but Hess might have.

Hours into their flight, the drive fields suddenly reversed, and they were decelerating toward Cerberus, a three-ringed gas giant in the outer system, with a litter of frozen moons, the largest of which were Styx and Lethe. Heather wanted to know, "What's there?"

Deirdre shrugged. Knowing Hess, it could be anything: a secret slaver base, or a hidden missile battery set to blast the corvettes. To know for sure she had to think like Hess, which Deirdre hated to do.

Even Deirdre was disappointed when the capsule ducked behind Cerberus and set down on the frozen surface of Styx, the innermost major satellite. Screens showed a bleak cratered moonscape, half covered by heaps of frozen methane snow. Their pursuers were temporarily hidden by Cerberus, but the two corvettes were certainly decelerating to match orbits.

Suddenly a new craft burst onto the screens, lifting off the far side of Styx, headed outsystem at maximum acceleration, but keeping the bulk of Cerberus between it and the corvettes. Deirdre immediately recognized the vessel's profile; it was the *Endurance*'s other lifeboat, the exact twin of the craft they were in. This duplicate capsule had been stashed ahead of time on the backside of Styx, and it would now come streaking out from behind Cerberus, just as the corvettes were slowing to match orbits, mimicking the old slaver trick of using a star or gas giant to mask a tight maneuver. Only this time Hess had set up a fast shuffle, sending the corvettes tearing into interstellar space running down the wrong capsule. Yet another coup for the commander of the *Hiryu*.

Grasping what would happen, Heather announced, "We must tell the Navy they are after the wrong ship."

"How?" Deirdre was dead set against reprogramming the controls, or even flipping on the comlink.

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"We could trigger an emergency beacon," Heather insisted, "then the corvettes could come get us."

"Maybe." Emergency beacons were self-contained, with their own power and programming—so it should be perfectly safe. And they could not just sit huddled in the lifeboat while the Navy went rocketing away into the unknown. But it was equally stupid to take chances with a stone cold killer like Hess. "Only if we suit up first, and take a beacon outside."

"Suit up?" Jason looked surprised, but intrigued.

"And go outside?" Heather was horrified. "It is ghastly cold out there."

"Then stay safe and snug in here," Deirdre suggested. "I am not going to break programming while sitting in this capsule."

"Go outside! Super cool." Jason started pawing through the suit locker, producing an emergency kit and beacon. Deirdre helped him suit up, and Heather had to do the same, or be left alone in the lifeboat.

Supercool indeed. Styx was stuck in perpetual winter, with a bleak pitted surface where the only atmosphere was the sort that you could pick up off the ground, then watch as it vaporized in your glove. Deirdre knelt in frozen methane, setting out a beacon with a twenty minute delay, then led her charges through the methane snow to put a low crater ring-wall between them and whatever happened next. Heather dragged her feet, plainly thinking the whole trek was unnecessary, but since the suits had no comlinks, she could not complain.

Before they even got to the ring-wall, Jason spied a line of crisp bootprints heading off across the methane field. Touching helmets with Deirdre, he demanded, "Who the hell left those?"

Who indeed? They were on a frigid moon in an uninhabited part of a slaver system deep in the Far Eridani. People did not just stroll past. You had a better chance of seeing a Yeti, or some unknown xeno. Of course there was no telling when the tracks were made. With no atmosphere to speak of, tracks could last a long time before being covered up by methane geysers and outgasing.

Having no time to dally over new mysteries, Deirdre dragged the children behind the ring-wall, where they waited for the emergency beacon to trigger. She scanned the dark sky for some sign of the corvettes, which should look like small fast satellites. Precisely twenty minutes after setting the beacon, there was an intense flash, melting methane on the far side of the crater. Moments later Deirdre felt the bang in the insulated seat of her suit that was the escape pod blasting itself to bits. Clearly Hess planned for this possibility.

Without comlinks, Deirdre could not even say, "Told you so." Standing up, she saw frozen methane slowly falling on a huge melted patch where the lifeboat and beacon had been. Touching helmets with the children, she told them curtly, "Follow me."

Finding the line of prints, Deirdre followed them away from the falling methane, which is what Hess must have intended. Her sole attempt at deviating from the program had resulted in the complete obliteration of their only transport and shelter, leaving them stranded in vacuum suits on a lifeless world, without supplies or comlinks. If these boot prints did

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not lead somewhere, they could choose between freezing to death, or drowning in their own body wastes.

She followed the crisp prints across a field of frozen methane, with the children trudging behind her, turning the line of prints into a trail. Above them, bright young stars burned amid the strange constellations of the Far Eridani. At the end of the methane field, the prints descended into a yawning ice cave at the base of a crater—something clearly artificial and encouraging. Suit-lights came on as they entered the cave, bathing gleaming crystalline walls in dazzling white light. But, after several klicks of shining tunnel, the trail ended in a smooth blank ice wall.

For once, Deirdre was grateful to have been owned by slavers, otherwise she might have despaired. This blank wall was typical of slaver gates, which opened into walls and floors, making them nearly invisible to the uninitiated. Touching helmets with the children, Deirdre told them to lean against the frozen wall, then she did the same. Gates were controlled by a simple knock code, so Deirdre tried Konar's personal knock, 3-1-1. Instantly the ice wall vanished, and they tumbled into a different world.

Dark woods surrounded Deirdre, tall scaly tree trunks that disappeared into hot inky night overhead. Without their suit lights, they would have been in total blackness. Picking herself up, Deirdre noted her suit heaters had cut out and cool air had begun to circulate. Her suit claimed outside temperature had risen hundreds of degrees, and that the air was breathable. She doffed her helmet to give it the sniff test. Hot but bearable.

Heather and Jason dutifully did the same, asking together, "Where are we?"

"Still on Styx," she hazarded, "but in a shielded and insulated underground cavity."

"It looks huge." Jason sounded dubious. "And what are woods doing klicks underground?"

"Just 3V," Deirdre explained. "This is an entrance maze, a safety check, or holding area to keep undesirables from using the gate. Trees give the illusion of space." They were surrounded by dark hologram woods that seemed to stretch into limitless night, filled with virtual twistings and turnings that would keep them going in circles. Twenty paces into the woods, and she would never find the entrance gate again, much less the exit.

"So which way should we go?" Heather somehow expected her to know.

Deirdre honestly did not know what to do next, wishing now she had not blown up the lifeboat trying to contact the Navy. She should have known Hess would not let go so easily.

"Hello, Deirdre, how truly delightful to see you." As if summoned up by her thoughts, a cheerful, dapper Commander Hess strolled out of the dark woods, saying, "I dearly hoped you escaped the *Fafnir*, but I could not be sure."

Deirdre stood frozen in shock, but Jason acted, reaching into the emer-

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gency kit and producing a recoilless pistol, pointing it at the slaver. Hess continued to grin, striding toward them, adding, "And you brought the kids too, bravo."

"Shoot!" shouted Heather, and Deirdre was jerked alert. Reaching out, she snatched the pistol from Jason.

"He has to be a holo," Deirdre told the protesting boy, who dearly wanted to bag his first slaver. Laws of physics did not allow Hess to be in two places at once. When they left the lifeboat, Hess and the *Hiryu* had been boosting outsystem at an incredible clip, so this had to be a holo.

To be sure, she aimed the pistol at Hess and pressed the firing stud, sending a volley of steel-jacketed rockets shooting through the slaver's virtual chest and vanishing into the hologram night, trailing points of fire. Hess grimaced. "That was uncalled for."

"Just proving a point." Deirdre shrugged. "I knew you must be a holo."

"Alas, it is true." Hess stopped in front of her, and did a little bow, clicking virtual heels. "And what man would not rather be in the flesh with you?"

Gallant as always. This hologram was most likely a 3V guide, set up ahead of the time as part of the escape program. With a negligent wave, Hess indicated a dark path to the left, saying, "If m'lady will but follow me."

"He's a slaver," Heather protested.

"No, he is a holo." A real slaver would not be nearly so polite.

"Why trust him?" Jason sneered, still disappointed the pistol had not blown Hess apart.

So was Deirdre, but her only choice was to follow this hologram Hess. At worst he would lose her in the woods, but that might easily happen without him. Best to pretend cooperation, giving the program no reason to discard her.

"Give me the gun back," Jason demanded, trying to be the man of the group.

"No way." Deirdre was not giving in to attempts to run things from the bottom. Besides, the King believed that women ought to go armed, and had given Priscilla her first pistol.

"Great," Jason scoffed, "guess we can have Heather throw another fit if we have to."

"How about we throw you?" Heather suggested.

Deirdre pocketed the gun, threatening them with the remote instead. "Shut up, or I will put you both on MUTE."

"Children can be a trial." Hess smirked at her troubles, then led them down a dark crooked path that branched and twisted between low boles and thick protruding roots, while virtual bats twittered overhead, sounding like the souls of the damned. Eventually the hot hologram forest gave way to a grove of black poplars bordering a boiling stream. Which was no hologram effect. Deirdre could not even go near the searing stream without first sealing her suit.

Hess waded casually into the boiling water, and they were forced to follow, suit refrigerators whining in protest as the scalding stream came up to the kids' waists. So far Deirdre's survey vessel suit had taken her

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through frozen methane and superheated steam, showing slavers stole the best.

Beyond the billowing curtain of steam, they broke out into daylight, and the hot hellish woods vanished, replaced by a garden full of fruit trees. Pears, apples, oranges, plums, and tangerines hung from limbs twined with grape and berry vines, all miraculously bearing fruit together, filling the air with sweet scents. Music throbbed in the middle distance, and loud laughter came from the undergrowth.

Suddenly a naked woman burst from the brush, laughing and running, followed by a nude grinning slaver, covered with dragon tattoos, who was himself pursued by three more bare-naked women. Party time on Styx.

All five ran straight through the v-suited group, showing the slaver and his naked ladies were holos. More nudists broke cover, and Deirdre realized there was a virtual orgy in progress, with hologram revelers playing sex games, and mating to ethereal music. Jason, for one, was disgusted, demanding to know, "What in hell is going on?"

"This is Elysium," Heather declared, giggling at the cross-country orgy.

Jason took that as a dig. "Dry up, blue bangs."

"No, it's true," his sister insisted. "Not our planet but the orchards of Elysium in the underworld. Did you sleep through planet studies? This is what our world is named after."

Jason looked unconvinced, but Heather was right; someone had created a virtual underworld beneath the frozen surface of Styx. Deirdre recognized slavers she knew wearing *Fafnir*'s blood-red dragon heart tattoo. Holos of dead men were dallying with virtual playmates in a 3V garden-scape. Grotesque even for slavers. She asked Hess, "What is all this?"

"Konar ordered it," the hologram answered airily, as if that justified anything, no matter how obscene and absurd. "He felt there should be some permanent record of the men who died under his command—beyond the usual list of aliases and DNA samples. What better way to preserve them than at play? Endlessly enjoying themselves."

"So are you dead too?" Deirdre asked hopefully.

"Heavens, I hope not." Hess looked aghast at the notion. "Last I heard, the *Hiryu* was headed outsystem at high-g, with yours truly in command, showing the Navy a clean pair of heels. I am merely here as a helpful subprogram."

Probably true. Deirdre saw no slavers with the *Hiryu*'s flying dragon tattoo. She asked, "So where are you taking us?"

"To your new home." Hess nodded at the holo-orgy. "None of this is real, and you would not like it much anyway."

His easy manner made her more suspicious. "Where is my new home?"

"Right where I am taking you," Hess replied cheerfully, setting out again on the garden path. Clearly a program loop would not let the holo tell her where they were going. Probably just as well.

Music faded behind them, along with the cries of pleasure. Finally, fruit trees parted to reveal a sunny beach ending in a long sandpit, with a white marble mortuary temple at the tip, surrounded on three sides by a china blue hologram sea, flat and placid in a perpetual noontide. Heat poured down from a hologram sun, and Deirdre's suit cooler kicked in

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again. Jason started to complain, but Heather told him to stuff it. "What heat? It is all in your head, remember? There is no sun, and we're not here."

But the big bronze temple doors were real, blended perfectly into virtual walls and columns. Deirdre had spent enough time in 3V to tell that the temple interior was carved from the living rock of Styx. Gold-skinned girls greeted them at the gilded door, small and slim, with wide grins and long blond hair; each wore nothing but a bit of kohl to show off wide amber eyes. They too were real, or as real as bioconstructs can be. Golden lips parted and the foremost girl told her, "How happy to have you here at last. Come, Deirdre, we have been waiting for you."

"For me?" Deirdre eyed the beautiful nude girls who barely came up to her shoulder—more Heather's size than hers. They all laughed, as if her question were absurd. Small gold hands seized her v-suit, pulling Deirdre into the seaside tomb. She looked questioningly back at Hess.

"There, you see, right at home, just as I said." Hess happily turned his charges over to the gilded bioconstructs, giving Deirdre a little nodding bow, then vanishing. End of program.

Letting herself be hauled inside, Deirdre asked, "Have you really been waiting for me?"

"Yes indeed," the golden girls insisted. "You are Deirdre, are you not? We have been waiting years for you. Everything is ready."

"Years?" This made no sense. How could they have waited years, when she decided to come this way only hours ago? Her suit watch confirmed it—this time last week she was on Hades, hoping the Navy would soon rescue her. "What is ready?"

"Everything," they assured her. "We will show you."

Suddenly one of the golden girls shouted, "Look, this is a boy!"

Which produced shrill cries of amazement. "What? Are you sure? Which one?"

"With the purple hair," declared the girl, pointing at Jason.

Her companions crowded around, saying, "Are you really sure?"

"Of course," the first girl insisted, "just look at her."

"Him, you mean," her companion corrected her. "Just look at him."

Someone finally asked the fuming Jason, "Is it true, are you really a boy?"

"Yes, you gilded morons." Jason could barely believe such idiocy. "Are you blind as well as brainless?"

"He has a boy's temper." They giggled knowingly.

Proud of their discovery, the golden girls led them triumphantly down the great columned hall of the mortuary temple calling out, "Look, it is Deirdre, and a boy!"

Women and girls of various description emerged from side apartments. Human females. Greenies. Plus even weirder bioconstructs, like women with pointy goat horns or prehensile tails. The closest thing to men were a couple of hermaphrodites, fully erect, excited to get a look at her and the boy, saying, "Yes, and Deirdre is with him. Konar will be so pleased."

Konar was fried to photons, but Deirdre did not say it. Undoubtedly these girls did not get out much. This had to be some secret slaver broth-

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el-cum-biolab—one even Deirdre had never heard about. From the way they talked, the golden girls were raised here, as were the wilder constructs, while the humans and Greenies were either taken as children, or bred in captivity.

But her biggest surprise was to be herded into "her" room—an exact duplicate of her old apartments on Hades, complete with her favorite works of art, her personal refresher, and her extended wardrobe, right down to the school T-shirt she was wearing when she was snatched from that bunker on New Harmony. A lot of it was stuff she had thrown away years ago. Spooky and then some.

Feeling silly standing in her own entryway wearing a v-suit, Deirdre asked for a chance to change and use the refresher. For a moment she was alone, aside from whatever spying eyes were in the walls, so while using the refresher, she managed to stick the plastic recoilless pistol in the back of her harem pants—fairly sure no one could have seen her, unless there was a camera trained up her ass. She covered it with her favorite embroidered jacket, glad to feel the familiar silk against her skin.

Stepping out of the refresher, she found Heather and Jason staring at her, obviously waiting for her to reappear. Deirdre asked warily, "What's the matter?"

Heather rolled her eyes toward the suite door. Standing in the doorway was a beautiful little girl of five or so, who looked exactly like Deirdre in miniature. This little Deirdre announced blandly, "You are in my room, but you may use it. It is your room too."

Deirdre did not know what to say. It was an awful shock to see her own features on a small child, but there was no mistaking the lustrous eyes, the tilt of her nose and the shape of her chin, all done in miniature. Amazing. The girl seemed equally intrigued by her, asking, "You are truly Deirdre?"

"That's me. Who are you?" Things were now officially too weird.

Her child-double smiled broadly. "I am Deirdre II. When I grow up we will be twins."

Actually they already were. Deirdre guessed this girl had been cloned from her DNA when she first arrived. (Along with who knows how many others?) Slavers must have liked their catch and decided to make extra copies—just in case. Konar had been raising her replacement in an exact duplicate of her apartment on Hades. "When your grown-up clothes arrived, I knew you would be here soon." Clearly Deirdre II had eagerly anticipated her advent. "Now you can teach me to be exactly like you."

"Great," Jason groaned, "then there will be two of them."

Fat chance. She was not going to settle down and give Deirdre-lessons to a preschooler. With Konar dead, this place no longer had a purpose, and was running on automatic, unaware that the slavers had been annihilated or driven from the system. Yet as isolated as this was, there still had to be some kind of control station, where she could contact the Navy, or at least shut off the entry maze. Unless this was truly just a mausoleum, a monument to Konar's dead crews, and a repository for his most prized playthings. She asked the women waiting outside the suite, "Is there a command deck or control area?"

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"Naturally," was the reply. "That is where we are taking you, now that you are refreshed and ready."

"And I can contact the outside from there?" Deirdre asked.

"Of course." They treated it like an incomprehensible request. Who could she possibly want to talk to? But whatever Deirdre wanted, Deirdre got.

At the C-deck door, Deirdre told everyone else to wait while she went in alone. They all obeyed, acting as if the place was now "hers"—in fact she found the door already keyed to her thumbprint, dilating at her touch. Deirdre stepped confidently onto the control deck, guessing that her arrival was the biggest thing that had ever happened hereabouts.

Make that the second biggest. Lounging relaxed and naked on the command couch, backed by the screens and control console, was her late unlamented master—Grand Dragon Konar. Unbelievable. Her first thought was this had to be 3V, like the holo Hess who guided her here, but then she saw her remote in his hand, the one that was blown up aboard *Fafnir*. Konar pressed a button, and Deirdre froze.

Shocked and appalled, unable to speak or move, she stood watching as Konar rose and walked over. His all-too-solid hand reached out, making her want to wince, but Deirdre could not even do that. All she could move were her eyes. Breath went in and out automatically. Konar stroked her cheek, saying, "Sorry, cute stuff, anything you could say would only spoil the moment. I told you I would never let you go."

Crushed at seeing Konar again, she damned herself for thinking she could just stroll in and take over. How was this even possible? Her mind groped for sane explanations. No one had gotten off the *Fafnir* alive, except for her, Heather, and Jason—Deirdre was sure of that.

Konar slid his fingers inside her silk jacket, running them down the front of her light blouse, enjoying the feel of her breasts through the thin fabric. Kissing her limp lips, he told her, "I am terribly proud of how you gave the Navy the slip. Hess and I had a bet on it. I feared they might catch you, but Hess was sure you would get through—so I have to pay up, when he comes for me."

With nothing to do but contemplate this latest disaster, Deirdre swiftly put the pieces together. Clearly Konar had not been aboard his flagship when *Fafnir* went on its death ride. He had been hiding out here on Styx, and his defiant "last battle" was an elaborate 3V ruse to make everyone think he was KIA. Bringing her aboard *Fafnir* for a "final" boink convinced both her and the crew that Konar was on the flagship—but once his captains had their orders, he secretly slipped away, leaving Hess and a holo-program in command. Project Medea and her own escape was an added diversion to decoy the corvettes, designed by Hess to get *Hiryu* safely away.

And it all worked as good as gravity. Even when outgunned and outnumbered, veteran slavers had centuries of experience at hoodwinking the Navy. Far from being finished with her, Konar was thrilled to have his property returned, running his hands over her hips, while fingering the remote. Soon it would be just like old times.

Sick with fear, Deirdre could feel the recoilless pistol digging into the

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small of her back, its cold muzzle pressed in her butt crack, centimeters from her limp hand. If Konar released her without a strip search, she would get one chance to shoot. Would she take it? Lisa-Marie middle school had not trained her for armed self-defense, much less premeditated homicide. She had shot Hess, knowing he was a holo. Could she shoot Konar for real? She prayed to Priscilla that she could—since that was what the King would do.

"And you brought the kids," Konar announced happily, "courageously saving River Lines from incinerating its innocent heirs. What a living doll you are, always doing just what you should. How could I ever give you up?"

And if he did, there was a little genetic understudy waiting just outside. Konar gave her fanny a pat, missing the gun muzzle by a millimeter or two, then he told the door to open, saying, "Send in the two children."

Heather walked into Deirdre's line of sight, looking terrified, followed by a defiant Jason. Konar greeted them with a cheery, "Happy to see you, too."

Ignoring the naked tattooed slaver, Heather looked hopefully at Deirdre. Seeing only one chance for them, Deirdre rolled her eyes significantly.

Heather rolled her eyes in response, then flipped over and fell to the deck, tossing and jerking violently, making ghastly gagging sounds.

"Oh, fuck! Another fit." Jason groaned. "Give it up."

Konar knelt next to the flopping and flailing Heather, asking, "Where is her remote?"

Jason shrugged, saying, "She'll get over it. Only does it to get attention."

Turning to Deirdre, Konar pushed UNMUTE and demanded, "Where is her remote?

"Inside jacket pocket." Deirdre dared not lie.

"I'll get it." Jason jumped up and reached inside her jacket, ignoring the remote, feeling about frantically. Looking up at her, he complained, "I cannot find it."

He was looking for the gun. Deirdre stared down at Jason, realizing that the nine-year-old had already made the choice she was struggling with. For better or worse, Jason was determined to save himself—and he deserved the chance, even if it killed him. "Behind my back," she whispered, "but make it good."

"Got it!" Jason declared proudly, his hand going around behind her. It came out holding the recoilless pistol, and Jason spun swiftly about, pretending to give it to Konar. In the split second it took to see it was not the remote in his hand, Jason pointed and fired.

Distracted by the convulsing Heather, Konar caught Jason's movement out of the corner of his eye. Leaping up, he spun like a cat, throwing himself out of the line of fire.

And catching a cluster of rocket darts full in the chest—since Jason had excitedly fired high and wide. Beginner's luck, but the results were impressive, spraying blood and bone all over the controls. And on Heather, who went into real hysterics.

Konar's body flipped backward, landing face up on the command couch.

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Deirdre stood impassively through it all, unable to move anything below her neck. When Jason looked questioningly over at her, she told him curtly, "Shoot him again."

Anything worth doing is worth doing right. Holding the gun steady with both hands, Jason shot Konar again in the chest, but the dead slaver did not even twitch. This time Konar was not coming back.

Then Deirdre told Jason to pick up the blood spattered remote and release her. Which he did, both elated and awed by having killed his first man.

She went to comfort Heather, calming the girl, then cleaning her up in the control deck refresher, which smelled heavily of Konar. Having soothed Heather's hysterics, Deirdre walked gingerly over to the bloody command console and opened an emergency channel, broadcasting their identity and position to the Navy. Armed merchant cruiser *Niger* returned the call, surprised to have a signal coming from a supposedly dead moon.

Informed that help was on the way, Deirdre opened the control room door. Women and girls stared in horror at the bloody mess. Greenies turned and fled. Only the golden girls knew what to do, bowing down to Jason, who was the new man in charge, and to Deirdre, the lovely angel who brought death into their secluded little world. With tears in her eyes, Deirdre II looked worshipfully up at her miraculous twin sister.

Atalanta was off hunting *Hiryu*, and *Calais* and *Zetes* were chasing down an empty lifeboat, but River Lines was elated to have unexpected custody of Konar's body, and the two lost River Lines heirs, who were now child heroes as well—turning the Battle of Tartarus into a triumphant victory, at least for River Lines. Only Hess and *Hiryu* got away. In a burst of corporate gratitude, River Lines gave Deirdre free first class tickets to New Harmony for her and Deirdre II, plus 1000 bonus light years to use or sell.

Heather begged Deirdre to stay with them, promising to make her rich forever. Deirdre said she would think about it, "But I must see my folks again." New Harmony might be hicksville, but it was home. Then Jason got his first real kiss from a grateful young woman, to go along with his first slaver kill and his immense inheritance. At this rate the boy would be running River Lines by the time he turned twelve.

Even going first class on a high-g ticket, it took Deirdre nearly a year to get home, and by then she was nineteen. To her, seven years had passed—but, thanks to relativity effects, it was thirty-something years later on New Harmony. Her parents were two divorced old people, who were nevertheless overjoyed to get back the daughter they'd given up for lost. Friends and siblings were in their forties and fifties, many with kids of their own, and they all made a great fuss over their teen "angel"—brought miraculously back from the dead. Which made Deirdre feel even more out of place.

Despite this awkward transition, going from slaver's head mistress to teen mom to her own twin, Deirdre was thrilled to be home, glad to see her parents and friends again, no matter how strange and aged they had become. Everyone doted on Deirdre II, telling the girl she would grow up to be a real heartbreaker, "just like her big sister."

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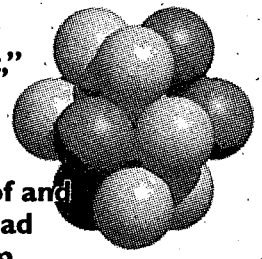
When the time was right, Deirdre took her little sister to put flowers in the public shelter she was kidnapped from. Long ago made into a shrine, the shelter was a grim, underground place, dedicated to people brought together by death, but there was bold new lettering above her memorial—RECOVERED ALIVE.

These two simple words radiated civic pride, celebrating Goodwill City's tiny triumph over a remorseless enemy. Deirdre helped her six year-old twin lay daisies on the spots where Hess had shot her schoolmates, saying prayers to Saint Michael in Neverland, who watches over little children. Long dead members of the Lisa-Marie middle school's Humanities Club looked up from their memorials, smiling in 3V. She told Deidre II each child's name, and what each one was like, what hopes they had, and what made them happy. They were the only people on New Harmony who were just as Deirdre remembered. ○

DEAR SCHRÖDINGER,



Regarding your comment, "I don't like it, and I'm sorry I ever had anything to do with it," —quantum mechanics, that is, well, gosh, we're *all* sorry about it, but there it is: virtual particles keep effervescing out of and back into the quantum foam (read *nothingness*) unless some random energy pulse empowers them with reality; particles that once were intimate with each other still act out their marriage after separation, however distant; their positions are statistical abstractions, never being more than 50 percent probable and even at 36 nanokelvins they refuse to be less than a skidmark; electrons go on leaping from one orbit to another without crossing the space between; so you might just as well stop bitching and buy cat food.

—David Lunde

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

OLYMPOS
by Dan Simmons
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Over the years, Dan Simmons has put himself on the map with science-fictional reframings of earlier literary classics, as in his "Hyperion cantos," loosely based on Keats's poetry. His previous novel, *Ilium* (which *Olympos* continues), began with a reconstruction of the Trojan War, generously spicing the Homeric epics with more modern elements ranging from Shakespeare's "Tempest" to H.G. Wells's *Time Machine,* with various Victorian poets and a broad sampling of earlier SF thrown in.

But in a characteristic twist, *Ilium* ended with a detour from the original plot, engineered by the revived twentieth-century American scholar Hockenberry, who came to the Homeric era to provide an objective chronicle of the fall of Troy. Now, in this second volume, the Greek and Trojan heroes have allied against the Olympian gods, with moravecs (advanced space-going robots) aiding the humans. And Helen of Troy has taken Hockenberry as her latest lover.

Meanwhile, in a different reality, a lovely but decadent human civilization is under attack from its feral former servants, the robot-like voynix. A third plot strand updates the conflict between the sorcerer Prospero, Caliban, and Caliban's monstrous god Setebos. Simmons brings each of these subplots to a boil, spinning off sub-sub-plots involving Achilles' love for an Amazon queen he has defeated in battle, Odysseus' voyage to the alternate Earth with Hockenberry and the moravecs, the arrival of Setebos and his minions in what was once Paris, and several more.

Simmons gets great fun out of having his characters quote freely from Homer, Shakespeare, Shelley, Browning, Proust, and a host of other sources that liberal arts majors can test their memories by spotting. Simmons often gives his borrowings an ironic twist—as when Odysseus quotes from Tennyson's "Ulysses," or when Prospero objects to playing himself in a production of "The Tempest," not wanting to memorize so many lines. Homeric heroes alternate between tough-guy street talk and high epic diction. Several of the moravec scientists turn out to be *Star Trek* fans, familiar with minute details of the show. This playfulness extends throughout the novel, tempering the tone of doom-and-gloom common in Simmons's earlier work (not that it's absent here).

Olympos stands reasonably well alone, although it takes on more resonance read as a sequel to *Ilium*. But even by itself, it works as a solid adventure story, with the plot mysteries explained in SF terms (not without some hand-waving, but that's all in the spirit of fun, too). But Simmons also gives the reader a world-sweeping subject, strong action, an eye for vivid settings, and believably grey characters. Run through his literary blender and

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spiked with a surprising sense of humor, the result is one of his most enjoyable pieces to date.

ACCELERANDO
by Charles Stross
Ace, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-441-01284-1

Stross, described by Cory Doctorow as "the mad antipope of the Singularity," has assembled his innovative "Lobsters" stories, which appeared in this magazine from 2000 to 2004, into a fixup novel. Even if you read them all individually, the impact of the entire set makes for an exhilarating read.

The story begins in the second decade of this century, just on the verge of the Singularity (here, the emergence of artificial intelligences so superior to humankind that extrapolation of history into the future is effectively impossible). The central figure of the first three stories is Manfred Macx, an electronic entrepreneur who has figured out how to survive by making other people rich. His strategy consists of reinventing economics on the fly to exploit the potential of amplified human intelligence. His major struggle is staying one step ahead of his ex-wife, Pamela, an accountant who pursues him around the world with a huge bill for back taxes.

A brief reunion results in the birth of a daughter, Amber, who in the middle third of the story uploads a version of herself into a software program to go on an expedition to a nearby star, where alien intelligence has been detected. The aliens turn out to be small-time (but highly advanced) con artists, preying on naïve beings who fall for their crooked economic schemes. But her real discovery is the inevitable result of the Singularity, the emergence of computronium, microscopic artificial intelligences who surround their star and convert all extraneous mass into further copies of themselves. By now, most human beings have become effectively post-human, with computer implants and augmentations. Even splitting into several divergent computer personalities is commonplace. But computronium is a step beyond, causing the reduction of all matter to components of a vast artificial intelligence network.

Returning to the solar system, Amber takes up residence in the atmosphere of Saturn, the inner system already being well on the way to conversion to computronium. There, she encounters a surprise: son Sirhan, the offspring of the version of herself who stayed behind. The father is Sadeq, a Muslim cleric sent by Pamela to undermine Manfred's plans to insure their daughter's freedom. The last three stories reunite the entire family, including Aineko, Manfred's cyborg cat, who turns out to have far more to do with events than the humans have suspected.

The Macxes and their group spend much of the last third of the book working (not necessarily all together) to escape the solar system. Even Pamela, who steadfastly refuses to be modified or uploaded in the manner of the other family members, makes a reappearance. But in the inner system, the Vile Offspring of the now-all-but-obsolete human race are reaching out to convert their worlds—and what's left of humanity—into computronium.

Stross spins this generational saga with great wit and energy, throwing in references to a huge range of literary and cultural material, an even more exhilarating mix in novel form than in the separately published stories. Stross also man-

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ages to make economics seem almost as hip as the runaway cybernetic revolution that serves as background to the story. Don't miss this one.

QUICKSILVER
Volume One of the Baroque Cycle
by Neal Stephenson
Perennial
(HarperCollins), $15.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-06-059308-3

This one's a couple of years old, and only peripherally SF, but so good that it's worth calling to the attention of anyone who—like this reviewer—might have missed it before now.

Stephenson frames the trilogy of which this is the beginning as a sort of prequel to his *Cryptonomicon,* with ancestors of several of his characters from that book and a similar theme of cryptography and international intrigue. The story is set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, precisely the time when modern science was just beginning to make an impact on Europe. And, much like Thomas Pynchon's best work, it combines the author's imaginative constructs so seamlessly with real historical events that a reader may wonder just which parts are real and which invented.

The book begins in Boston, in 1713, where Daniel Waterhouse is busy bringing the fruits of the new natural philosophy to the new world at a college he has founded, evidently a predecessor to M.I.T. (The Harvard of the era is interested primarily in training clergy for the churches of the colony.) Waterhouse, we learn, is considered something of a crank by his fellow Bostonians, but (as Isaac Newton's old college roommate and a key member of the Royal Academy) an authority on the new way of doing science.

The narrative then jumps back to the 1660s, to Daniel's youth in England, and follows his career through the remainder of the Stuart Restoration. Raised a Puritan in one of the most radical sects, Daniel is at a great social disadvantage at a Cambridge now being reclaimed by the dissolute sons of the returning Cavaliers. But he turns out to have a knack for diplomacy, a talent useful to all parties—especially since he is one of the few men able to get along with the cantankerous but obviously brilliant Newton.

Meanwhile, on the continent, several wars are raging. The Turks are besieging Vienna, resisted by a coalition of mostly German states, while Louis XIV of France carries on a sporadic war against the Netherlands, various small German states, and anyone else he can concoct a reason to fight. The English are in a series of shifting alliances, fighting a series of small wars all over the continent. Against this background, a half-crazed vagabond known as Jack Shaftoe cuts a swath from the siege of Vienna to Amsterdam, in the company of Eliza, whom he rescued from a Turkish harem. Against all odds, both find themselves caught up in high political machinations—Jack as a courier for the French, Eliza as a spy for the English.

In the background, a different kind of conflict is brewing between Newton and his continental counterpart, Leibnitz, over who should be recognized as the inventor of the calculus. Daniel Waterhouse is caught in the middle; he recognizes that Leibnitz's method is superior, but, of course, it's impossible for an Englishman to admit as much in public.

Stevenson winds all these (and sev-

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eral more) plot strands through a densely woven historical background, some as preposterous as anything invented for an alien SF society—which of course the Baroque period is, in several important ways. Often the most bizarre details are straight out of history, heightened in the manner of the famous pizza delivery scene that opens *Snow Crash*. Stephenson gives a list of characters to help the reader sort out the historical from the fictional, and this particular edition includes brief appendices on the origin of the Baroque Cycle and other details of likely interest.

A big, sprawling read, and with all three volumes now available, readers can plunge in without having to wait for the continuation. For anyone who's enjoyed Stephenson's work in the past, I heartily recommend the Baroque Cycle.

THE WHITE WOLF'S SON: The Albino Underground
by Michael Moorcock
Warner, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-446-57702-2

Moorcock continues his saga of the multiverse, in which a mutating cast of archetypal heroes carries on an eternal struggle between Chaos and Law. The central figure here, as in much of his best work, is Elric of Melnibone—an albino warrior whose extended family includes Oonagh von Bek, the main narrator of this installment.

As the book opens, Oonagh is a young girl living in Yorkshire. One day, when Oonagh's parents are away, strangers begin to appear in the neighborhood. One pair strike her immediately as suspicious, claiming an undue familiarity with her family and attempting to lure her away from the home. Others appear to be old family friends, military types who have come to protect her against the suspicious pair; these she welcomes, and ends up taking out to dinner. But the next day, a sudden earthquake drops Oonagh into deep caves that lie under the family home, and her adventures begin.

A talking fox in eighteenth century finery, Lord Reynard, takes her to a nearby city where he rules the Thieves' Quarter. There she meets a blind albino boy, perhaps Elric's son, and a young woman who appears to be Oonagh's grandmother—temporal relationships are fluid in the multiverse. Reynard, a student of the Enlightenment philosophers, is exploring ways to return her home, perhaps by magic. Then Oonagh's pursuers attack, and in a magical duel the city is flooded.

Oonagh and her friends (including the old family friends who have now reappeared) flee across the fantastic landscapes of several alternate Europes, winding up in a world in which Britain plays the role of Nazi Germany, spreading its evil dominion across the continent.

We quickly learn that henchmen of the evil king of England are searching for Oonagh and the albino boy, whose blood holds the key to the fate of the entire multiverse—and it is soon clear that they are the same enemies who have pursued her from her Yorkshire home.

Elric also searches for her, while her allies and enemies go through shifting configurations of friend and foe. Oonagh and the albino are captured, taken to England, and the evil-doers' plot seems on the brink of fruition—but of course, the game isn't to be ended that quickly or easily.

Moorcock plays his customary games with shifting realities, larger-than-life characters, and a plot as-

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sembled from disparate mythical themes mutated through an ironic sensibility. Here, the bright young protagonist makes the novel fresh enough to keep all but the most jaded reader from realizing just how many times Moorcock has told this story in some slightly altered guise. Needless to say, the journey is enjoyable despite its familiarity.

MAGIC STREET
by Orson Scott Card
Del Rey, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-3454-41689-9

Card's latest is a contemporary fantasy, with a young protagonist who comes of age over the course of the story. So far, familiar enough. But Card steps out of comfortable territory by setting the story in Baldwin Hills, a black suburb of Los Angeles, with an all-black cast.

The opening scenes set the stage for the main action. A college professor picks up a ragged hitchhiker, who seems to have a power to impose his will on those around him. Prof. Williams takes the hitchhiker home to Baldwin Hills, to discover his wife is about to give birth—despite not previously being pregnant. The hitchhiker takes away the baby boy and leaves it in a nearby park, where it is found by two young boys sneaking off to smoke dope. One of them, Cecil (Ceese) Tucker, and takes it home, giving the child the name Mack Street.

Ceese, his mother, and the next-door neighbor, bring up Mack, whose strange birth is apparently forgotten by everyone who witnessed it. But Mack is . . . different. For one thing, he appears at first to have no independent will, merely doing as he is told by the authority figures around him. He also has the ability to see inside people's dreams—especially wishing dreams, which begin to come true, harming the dreamer by fulfilling the wish in a perversely literal way. At the same time, Mack has a dream of his own, one in which he is trying to escape some disaster that he cannot see. His greatest fear is that his own dream will come true.

The crisis comes as Mack reaches his teens. For the first time, he notices a house that shouldn't be there, tucked away in a spot he can only see out of the corner of his eye. He carefully makes his way to the door, and finds it inhabited by a ragged man that the reader instantly recognizes as the same hitchhiker who had such a strange role in Mack's birth.

And out the back door, Mack finds a magical forest, filled with strange creatures—including a panther that guards what the hitchhiker tells him are imprisoned spirits. He quickly learns that time spent in this magical world doesn't pass in the normal world, but that any mark he makes will make some impact on the Los Angeles he inhabits—usually incomprehensibly except to him.

Around this time another strange person appears in the neighborhood, a beautiful woman who rides a motorcycle. She had appeared to several other characters around the time of Mack's birth, but at first he has no knowledge of this. Eventually Mack learns the truth about both her and the hitchhiker; they are both residents of the fairy realm, locked in a struggle with the king of that land for control of the world. And Mack himself is a major weapon in that struggle, conceived as a means of giving the king a way of entering into the dreams of humans and eventually into the real world.

Card combines the modern milieu and the old English folklore tradition

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smoothly and convincingly. His choice of setting isn't without its risks, and I'm sure there will be readers who think he's missed the target with his presentation of this particular segment of society. But it's good to see him stretching into new territory, and especially good to see him making it work so smoothly. Urban fantasy fans take note.

THE STONEHENGE GATE
by Jack Williamson
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN 0-765-3089705

Jack Williamson has gathered just about all the honors and recognition anybody could ask for in the SF/fantasy field. So it's very much a bonus that, at the age of ninety-seven, he continues to write, especially since he is still turning out top-level work. (One segment of his previous book, *Terraforming Earth,* won both Hugo and Nebula awards as best novella, and the novel as a whole won the 2002 John W. Campbell award.)

The Stonehenge Gate is, in one sense, a book that Williamson could have published in the 1950s—possibly even earlier—although modern attitudes on politics, gender, and race clearly mark it as coming from a more recent era. Next to the work of Stross, Stephenson, or Simmons, the book may seem old-fashioned. But Williamson is as good a storyteller as any of them, and it's easy to see why he's still appearing on awards ballots.

The narrator of the novel is Will Stone, an English professor at the New Mexico university where Williamson himself is Professor Emeritus. Stone and three fellow professors get together regularly to play poker, and to talk about whatever strikes them as interesting. The story begins when one of them, Derek Ironcraft, a physicist and astronomer, reports finding a Stonehenge-like rock formation in ground-piercing radar images of the deep Sahara desert. The group, which includes two anthropologists, decides to pool its resources to investigate the structure.

They arrive at the structure, but almost as soon as they begin to study it, an insect-like creature emerges from one of the gates. It seizes Lupe Vargas, one of the anthropologists, and carries her through the gate before the others can react. That act forces the other three to enter the gate in hopes of rescuing their friend. They emerge at first into a waterless, oxygen-poor world that Ram, the other anthropologist, compares to the hell his grandmother described coming through before her life in Africa, where he was born. Using oxygen gear, they push through it into another dry world, but one where they can survive—and where a road stretches out before them.

Thus begins Will's odyssey through several alien worlds in search of his captured friend. Eventually Will and Ram arrive in a world where an equatorial continent of black humans has been colonized by a polar continent of whites. Ram, who has a luminous birthmark similar to symbols marked on the gates, is recognized by the natives as an avatar of their god, Anak; his arrival serves as the spark for a rebellion against the colonial overlords. At first the overlords appear to be in control, but a plague to which the blacks are immune turns the tables. Will and Ram move on, eventually uncovering the beginnings of an answer to some of the enigmas they have seen along the way.

Get yourself a copy of *The Stonehenge Gate*—it's classic SF at its best. O

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SF Conventional Calendar

Easter's the big spring convention weekend. It's time to start anticipating. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2006

6–8—**GAFilk.** For info, write: **890-F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) gafilk.com. (E-mail) none announced.** Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Airport North, 13880 Virginia Ave. Guests will include: the musical group Dandelion Wine.

13–15—**Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. A. Steele.

13–16—**COsine, Box 50618, Colorado Springs CO 80949. firstfridayfandom.org.** Colorado Springs CO. Lee & Miller.

20–22—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org.** Marriott, Troy MI. V. Vinge, S. Stiles, M.B. Clapp.

27–29—**VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org.** Harvard University. G.R.R. Martin.

FEBRUARY 2006

9–12—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. capricon.org.** Sheraton, Arlington Hts. (Chicago) IL. Peter Beagle.

10–12—**Farpoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. farpoint.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Media SF.

17–19—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. Ken MacLeod.

17–19—**Life, the Universe, & Everything, 3146 JKHB, Provo UT 84602. ltue.byu.edu. ltue@byu.edu.** BYU campus.

17–19—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. shawn-pack@yahoo.com.** Red Lion, Pasco WA.

17–19—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. visioncon.net.** Media, gaming, SF and fantasy.

17–19—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. gallifreyone.com.** LAX Marriott. Barrowman, Jameson. Doctor Who.

17–19—**KatsuCon, Box 7064, Silver Spring MD 20907. katsucon.com.** Omni Shoreham, Washington DC. Anime.

24–26—**NonCon, Box 3817, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie NY 12604. noncon.net.** On campus. Gaming emphasis.

MARCH 2006

3–5—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (228) 435-5217.** Mississippi Coast Convention Center.

11–12—**P-Con, Yellow Brick Road, 8 Bachelor's Walk Dublin 1, Ireland.** Ashling Hotel. Guest of Honor TBA.

15–19—**IAFA, Box 10416, Blacksburg VA 24062. iafa.org.** Airport Wyndham, Ft. Lauderdale FL. Academic conference.

17–19—**LunaCon, 847-A 2nd Ave. #234, New York NY 10017. lunacon.org.** Sheraton, E. Rutherford NJ (near NYC).

APRIL 2006

13–16—**FroliCon, 1011 Kinsey Dr., Huntsville AL 35803. frolicon.org.** Crowne Plaza, Atlanta GA. Over 18 only.

13–16—**EuroCon, Box 57018, Kiev 03126 Ukraine. (380-44) 455-3575. eurocon.kiev.ua.** Kiev Ukraine. Poyarkov.

13–16—**NorWesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850.**

14–16—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. mnstf.org.**

14–17—**UK National Con, Box 64128, Sunnyvale CA 94088. (650) 722-1413. eastercon2006.org.** Glasgow Scotland.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $150+.

AUGUST 2007

2–5—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org.** Collinsville IL. North American SF Convention for 2007.

30–Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. $180+.

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH COVER STORY

David Ira Cleary returns after a long absence with our lead story for March, painting a picture of a fascinating and intricate future world where keeping up with the body modifications of your peers is "The Kewlest Thing of All"—but, as it turns out, not nearly the most *important* thing. The striking cover is by **J.K. Potter**.

ALSO IN MARCH

British "hard science" writer **Paul J. McAuley** takes us to a prison in the far reaches of the Solar System, to show us how some consequences of the devastating Quiet War can persist for years after the War is ostensibly over, with deadly results; **Deborah Coates** makes her *Asimov's* debut by demonstrating how a young girl's life can go in "Forty-Six Directions, None of Them North": hot new British writer **Neal Asher** guides us around a mysterious alien planet, where the monstrous and inimical creatures who live there can grind your bones to dust if you make the slightest misstep while investigating "The Gabble"; the popular and prolific **Robert Reed** explains how some seeds that are scattered can take a very long time to germinate, in the bittersweet "Rwanda"; new writer **Chris Roberson** invites us along with a Steeplejack on his rounds over the spires and rooftops of an immense and baroque building that covers thousands of square miles, and shows us how to deal with some of the ghosts who haunt it, in "Companion to Owls"; and British writer **Chris Beckett** sends us into deep space with some astronauts who boldly go where *nobody* has gone before, and then realize that they can't find their way *back*, as they discover a "Dark Eden."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column offers us some tasty "Plutonium for Breakfast"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and, in our Thought Experiments feature, **Joe Lazzaro** examines the connections between science fiction and the space program that have helped take us "More Than Halfway to Anywhere"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our March 2006 issue on sale at your newsstand on January 31, 2006. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

COMING SOON

cranium-crushing new stories by **Brian Stableford**, **Robert Silverberg**, **Ian McDonald**, **R. Neube**, **James Patrick Kelly**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Mary Rosenblum**, **Nancy Kress**, **Paul Melko**, **William Shunn**, **Rudy Rucker**, **Liz Williams**, **L. Timmel Duchamp**, **Wil McCarthy**, **Ruth Nestvold**, **Robert Reed**, and many others.

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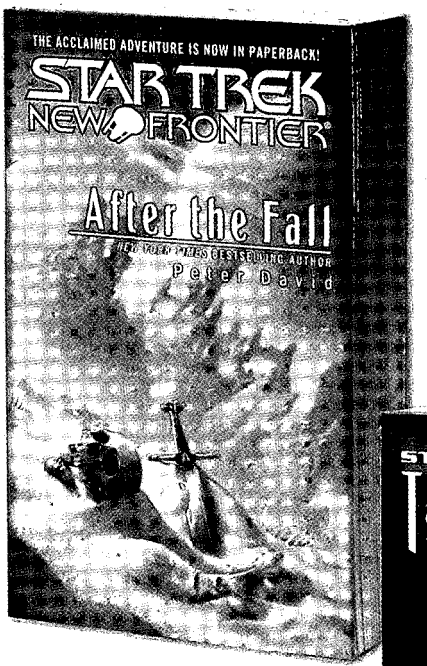

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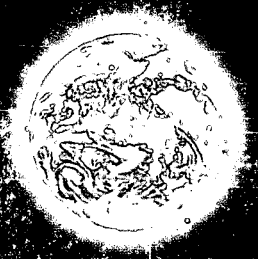

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